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“Story of My Body – Lifelong Body Image Narratives Among Eastern European Females in Their 30s”

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List of Abbreviations

- Body Image: BI
- Body Image Dissatisfaction: BID
- British Psychological Society: BPS
- Central and Eastern European: CEE
- Counselling Psychology: CoP
- Dialogic/Performance Narrative Analysis: DPNA
- Eating Disorders: EDs
- Eastern European: EE
- Health and Care Professional Council: HCPC
- Narrative analysis: NA
- Socioeconomic Status: SES

Abstract

This research examines the lifelong body image (BI) experiences of Eastern European (EE) women in their 30s who have relocated to London. Despite significant attention to BI issues, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the experiences of women in their 30s, particularly those from Eastern Europe. When these women move to the UK, their BI experiences are further complicated. Navigating a cultural shift from the patriarchal and uniform beauty ideals of Eastern Europe to the individualistic and competitive standards of Western Europe, they also contend with the biological and social changes typical of this life stage. The research delves into how these transitions shape their BI and identity, shedding light on the dual and often conflicting beauty norms they encounter.

The research involves five EE women who moved to London at least four years ago and after the age of 17, allowing them to adapt to the UK environment while having internalised their EE cultural backgrounds. Through semi-structured interviews, the study collected rich data that were then transcribed and analysed using Dialogic/Performance Narrative Analysis (DPNA) from a social constructionist perspective, examining the participants' BI narratives. Participants also presented up to five personal photographs to aid storytelling. The analysis focused on thematic content, structural elements, and personal positioning within the narratives, along with multivoicedness (various factors/voices that have shaped their BI throughout their lives).

Each narrative was explored individually, revealing how participants' BI identities are influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. Key themes included expressions of BI throughout their lives, from adolescence to middle adulthood, the navigation of contradictions and dualities stemming from internalised BI standards, and the evolution of BI through adaptation to a new culture. Reflexivity, essential to DPNA approach, was consistently integrated throughout the study.

This study highlights the complexity of BI by revealing the interplay between inherited cultural values shaped by patriarchy and newly acquired norms of Western freedom, often leading to contradictory perceptions. It emphasises the evolving nature of BI, influenced by personal experiences and cultural shifts. The findings enhance the understanding of BI construction among EE women as they navigate life changes.

The research demonstrates that BI is dynamic, shaped by diverse societal and cultural dialogues, and consists of multiple truths. Methodologically, it reinforces the value of narrative analysis and photographic methods in exploring BI and identity issues. The study presents insights for Counselling Psychology (CoP) and clinical practice, advocating for culturally sensitive therapies that incorporate narrative analysis (NA) and DPNA elements to effectively address BI challenges.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Study and its Context

This chapter lays the groundwork for the research by highlighting the importance of researching BI phenomenon. It outlines the theoretical framework of post-modern feminism in relation to BI, examines variations in BI standards between Western and Eastern Europe, and highlights the conflicting perceptions of body beauty across these regions. Additionally, it analyses the patriarchal norms in Eastern Europe and their impact, as well as how the fall of the USSR has influenced the objectification of EE female BI. The chapter culminates in a reflective statement on the researcher's personal connection to the topic and establishes the research questions and aims. It underscores that a deep understanding of one's BI comes from encouraging individuals to share their unique narratives.

1.2 The Evolution and Significance of Western Females' Body Image

From ancient history to the modern digital age, bodily beauty has been highly valued by society. Today, the subject of BI remains as relevant and dynamic as ever. The evolution of Western females' BI ideals from curvaceous Greek gods to slender 20th-century silhouettes reveals how cultural and societal norms re-shape our body and beauty ideals. Thus, individual BI does not develop and evolve in isolation; rather, it is closely bound to ever-changing social and cultural contexts (Aniulis et al., 2021). Society, peers, parents, social media and cultural influences significantly impact our perception of the ideal body size and shape (Fallon, 1990). According to Orbach (1998), from an early age, girls form a concept of their bodies as "socially constructed commodities." Under the constant bombardment of advertisements urging us to enhance our bodies, lose weight or undergo plastic surgery, alongside government warnings about rising obesity rates, we develop a sense of necessity to perfect and transform our bodies. Consequently, bodies become increasingly objectified, highlighting that the belief in the need for constant improvement of our bodies has become deeply ingrained in society. In turn, this often contributes to a sense of detachment from our bodies (Bordo, 2023). This phenomenon is largely attributed to the perpetuation of oppressive social narratives and constructs surrounding femininity, sexuality, beauty and body ideals, which are ingrained in cultural and contemporary societal trends (Orbach, 2018). These dynamics are

subjects of inquiry within feminist discourse, which examines the intricate interplay between societal constructs and gender norms.

1.3 Feminism and Body Image

Feminism is a multifaceted ideology and movement calling for gender equality and the dismantling of patriarchal norms since the late 19th century (Connelly et al., 2000). It addresses the experiences of women within political, economic, and social spheres to challenge oppressive systems and promote equity for all genders (Bennett, 1989). Particularly in the West, feminists are concerned with BI, as societal beauty standards reflect unrealistic ideals. In this study, “the West” includes shared beliefs and practices in Western Europe, North America, some regions of South America, and Australia (Eckersley, 2006). Within Western society, feminist discourse critiques how media, advertising, and popular culture propagate harmful beauty standards that negatively impact women, leading to negative BI, disordered eating, and negative self-imagine (Peterson et al., 2008). Additionally, feminists examine the intersection of beauty ideals with identity factors such as race, ethnicity, and class (Ghodsee, 2004). They advocate for body acceptance and self-love, exemplified by movements like body positivity, which celebrate diverse body shapes and sizes (Humenikova & Gates, 2008) and promote more inclusive representation in media and fashion (Ghodsee, 2004). However, tensions arise within feminism regarding beauty practices, such as cosmetic surgery and beauty rituals. While some support individual choices regarding appearance, others critique these practices for perpetuating patriarchal ideals and reinforcing women's objectification (Peterson et al., 2008).

1.3.1 Postmodern Feminism in the Context of Eastern Europe

Contemporary Western feminism, known as 'second-wave' feminism, has shifted its focus from civil politics to interpersonal dynamics. Within the realm of second-wave feminism, various strands exist, including postmodern feminism, which is utilised in this study. This movement, prominent in Western contexts including London, challenges power imbalances by critiquing the social construction of gender, rejecting dualistic notions portraying men and women as fundamentally different or similar, instead focusing on gender categories and their purposes (Ebert, 1991; Whelehan, 1995). Postmodern feminists

undertake the deconstruction of female subjectivity, analysing how women's self-perceptions are shaped within discourses and power dynamics (Ebert, 1991) and examining power structures and their effects (Nicholson, 2013). Drawing from Foucault's work (1990), these feminists highlight the pervasive nature of power, which extends beyond institutional realms to everyday interactions and discourses, consistent with postmodern feminist ideas (Bordo, 2002).

When examining feminism in Central and Eastern European (CEE) societies, it is crucial to approach it with care to avoid misconceptions. After years under communist regimes that promoted gender equality but often failed to implement it, CEE countries have undergone complex transitions reshaping gender dynamics (Havelkova et al., 1995). Šiklová (2018) emphasised the need to consider these unique social realities and caution against directly applying Western feminist theories, which may not align with the agendas of EE women. Postmodern feminism in this context must critique not only lingering patriarchal structures but also newly adopted Western neoliberal models that emphasise market-driven ideals, including beauty standards and consumerism (Cerwonka, 2008). It seeks to dismantle traditional narratives enforced by both Eastern and Western influences, advocating for diverse identity expressions that mirror EE women's rich cultural heritages and contemporary realities (Cerwonka, 2008). This approach stresses the importance of valuing local traditions and histories while engaging with global feminist discourses to deal with matters such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and political representation.

Postmodern feminism in Eastern Europe highlights the importance of intersectionality, examining how women's experiences are influenced by the interplay of gender with ethnicity, class, and age (Carson, 2004). In Eastern Europe, characterised by ethnic diversity and historical tensions, this approach is vital for understanding the complex ways different groups of women face social and cultural challenges characterised by unique beauty pressures shaped by cultural and regional expectations (Funk & Mueller, 2018). In certain contexts, there is significant emphasis on traditional beauty ideals, like a slim figure and specific feminine appearances, influenced by both Western media and local norms. Socioeconomic factors can further affect women’s access to beauty products and services, impacting their experiences of beauty standards (Funk & Mueller, 2018). This postmodern perspective empowers women to reclaim agency over their bodies and identities, encouraging

them to resist unrealistic standards and celebrate diverse forms of beauty (Nicholson, 2013). By doing so, they challenge dominant beauty narratives that often marginalise or exclude non-Western aesthetics. Postmodern feminism advocates for these voices to be heard and included in the feminist discourse, promoting an inclusive and multifaceted understanding of women's rights.

1.4 Exploring Body Image Variances: Western and Eastern Perspectives

Expectations regarding body appearance are significantly influenced by cultural and social contexts that vary across regions. In Western society, the concept of the desired body has evolved throughout the 20th century, with a thin body ideal stemming from unrealistic beauty standards rooted in individualistic values (Kakar, 2022; Sultanova, 2022; Swami et al., 2010; Warren et al., 2005). Earlier in the century, the ideal female body was portrayed as curvy with a rounded stomach and hips; however, since the 1990s, Western beauty standards have increasingly promoted unrealistic levels of thinness, often excluding any visible body fat (Calogero et al., 2007; Swami, 2015). Today, societal expectations dictate that women should have a curvy figure with a large rear and breasts while maintaining a thin waist and visible thigh gap (McComb & Mills, 2022). This shift reflects changing perceptions of beauty and health. Consequently, Western culture shapes how family and friends convey messages about our bodies from an early age, both negatively and positively (Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000), contributing to our beliefs about the ideal body.

In contrast, countries outside Western cultural influences often have different perceptions of body size (Viren et al., 2023). In India, larger bodies are associated with prosperity, while in some Arab countries, they symbolise grace and fertility. In various Sub-Saharan African regions, bigger bodies are viewed as indicators of health (Hurston et al., 2024). Despite these variations, little is known about Eastern body ideals, particularly in EE countries following the dissolution of the USSR in the 1990s (Eiroá Orosa, 2013; Koposov et al., 2022; Lukács et al., 2021; Oshio & Meshkova, 2012). I refer to EE society as a diverse amalgamation of cultural characteristics, beliefs, traditions, and practices shared by countries in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Latvia, and Lithuania. This region reflects a rich history influenced by various civilisations and notably, the USSR (King, 2000). Consequently, Russian language and culture persist in many EE countries due to Russia’s

historical and geopolitical impact. While not everyone speaks Russian fluently, it often serves as a second language, with its prevalence varying across different countries (Maresceau, 1992).

Limited research indicates that Post-Soviet EE body standards significantly diverge from Western norms, influencing individuals' BI formation (Catina et al., 1996; Bilukha & Utermohlen, 2000). Kostyaev (2009) and Inglehart (2006) noted that during the communist era, EE countries exhibited less pronounced gender power dynamics in the professional sphere and upheld collectivist values. This context portrayed the female body in the USSR as one that emphasised strength and chastity, devoid of sexual connotations (Azhgikhina, 1995). Maternal traits and traditional female roles were highlighted through conservative attire that suppressed individuality (Funk & Mueller, 2018). Public appearances typically avoided makeup and stylish clothing, favouring a sexless, generic aesthetic. Government and media promoted an idealised BI that lacked creativity or individuality, embodying the notions of the "comrade" woman or nurturing maternal figure (Azhgikhina, 1995). As Azhgikhina (1995) described, this culture created a "dream factory" where women served as mechanics, tractor drivers, and pilots alongside men. However, despite equal career opportunities, patriarchal structures persisted in EE countries during this time.

1.5 Patriarchy in Eastern Europe

Patriarchy in Eastern Europe persisted as a complex social structure deeply embedded in historical, cultural, and political contexts. In this work, patriarchy is defined as traditional gender roles reinforced by male dominance across various spheres, including family, politics, and the economy, which limit women's leadership, economic independence, and decision-making autonomy (Adams, 2005; Spencer, 1996). Systemic issues like gender-based violence and unequal resource access further entrench these power dynamics, complicating efforts to dismantle them (Duncan, 2002). While communist ideology initially embraced women's emancipation as crucial to the revolution, leading to increased workforce participation and government representation through Soviet quotas (Spencer, 1996), this claimed equality mainly involved women taking on traditionally male roles without corresponding equality in domestic responsibilities (LaFont, 2001). Consequently, patriarchal structures that predated communism persisted, with women shouldering both economic and domestic burdens

(LaFont, 2001). Instead of liberating women, state communism exploited them as both producers and reproducers (Miroiu, 2007). Thus, women faced a dual patriarchy: one within the home, or private patriarchy, and another in the public sphere (Spencer, 1996).

Despite the claimed gender equality during the communist regime, traditional gender roles persisted in post-communist Eastern Europe. Women were expected to uphold roles as caregivers and homemakers, remaining subordinate to men in both social and private settings (Adams, 2005). Additionally, the post-communist era witnessed a resurgence of conservative family values, emphasising females' roles as mothers and wives (Kiblitskaya, 2000). The transition to a market economy brought economic disadvantages for women, including high unemployment rates and lower wages, further reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics and contributing to women's subordination (Wolchik, 2019). Patriarchy also created barriers to women's political participation, hindering their influence in state decision-making (Adams, 2005). Men were often depicted as breadwinners and protectors, while women were relegated to the roles of housewives and mothers (Riabova & Riabov, 2002).

1.6 Eroticised Bodies

Since the fall of the USSR in 1991, societal transformations have led to the rise of Western media, where advertising serves as both a business tool and a platform for cultural ideals (Ibroscheva, 2013). This expansion introduced new concepts of femininity, entrepreneurship, and cultural symbols, often conflicting with traditional patriarchal values and significantly impacting women's self-esteem in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc nations (Hughes, 2005). The internalisation of Western body standards challenged EE women to redefine their identities in the post-communist landscape (Czepczor-Bernat et al., 2017). Furthermore, the portrayal of sexual pseudo-liberation aimed to politicise shifts in gender ideologies, though it often presented a simplistic, masculine perspective equating sexual expression with democracy (Borenstein et al., 2008).

Presently, the visual representation of EE women starkly contrasts with the previously perceived notion of asexuality during the communist era, sparking significant discussion in Western societies. The transformation brought about by the rapid emergence of post-communist fashion models on Western runways and magazine covers has been highlighted in discussions of cultural shifts (Banet-Weiser, 1999). However, this perspective underscores the

nuanced reality of the situation. Despite these observations, it's clear that EE women have rapidly embraced a new, highly sexualised identity (Ibroscheva, 2013). This allows them not only to participate as consumers but also to be objectified as the "consumed," willingly offering their sexualised bodies as a means of asserting newfound freedom in defining their identities (Rotkirch, 1999). This unique historical and social phenomenon was fuelled by increased Western media influence, unlike the USSR media, which was comparatively completely a-sexualised, leading to the objectification and eroticisation of the female body (Healey, 2014). Previously, advertising served primarily as propaganda, but with the introduction of capitalism, it became a commercial strategy where sexualisation and eroticisation were prominent goals.

Since 1990, Eastern Europeans have increasingly migrated to more developed Western nations in search of employment (Favell, 2008). This post-communist migration has affected lifestyles and altered mutual perceptions between EE men and women. Amidst the confusion and political upheaval following the collapse of the socialist regime, concepts of gender underwent significant transformation, leading to profound shifts in societal and cultural understandings of gendered identities, with economic factors playing a crucial role (Lange, 2008). The surge of financial investment in media and advertising, fuelled by global business enterprises, has positioned women as the main targets for hyper-sexualised products, depicting the body as a valuable commodity catering to diverse fantasies (Barker, 1999; Kligman, 1996). The influence of Western media, depicting EE bodies in traditional, sexualised ways, contributes to stereotypes and objectification (Krivonos & Diatlova, 2020). Such portrayals impact EE women's self-perception, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and shaping societal attitudes. EE women in Western Europe, particularly in cities as London, navigate dual or even more diverse cultural standards, multiple body ideals, and potential conflicts in beauty standards, grappling with challenges of integration and exposure to eroticised body representations in media. These influences deeply affect their self-perception and societal roles (Bilukha & Utermohlen, 2002).

1.7 Personal Reflexive Statement

As a woman in my early 30s from a small town in Russia, my formative years were deeply influenced by traditional family values and a patriarchal framework that emphasised

conformity to societal norms and ideals of beauty. This upbringing instilled in me rigid expectations regarding thinness, fair skin, and femininity, leading me to perceive my body through a lens of inadequacy and self-criticism. The belief that my worth was tied to meeting these standards shaped my relationship with my body and fuelled my anxiety over not conforming to these ideals. However, my life underwent a transformative chapter when I relocated to London, a change that profoundly impacted my identity and relationship with my body. The cultural shift toward 'body acceptance' in London liberated me from these rigid expectations and allowed me to embrace my body without the constant fear of societal judgment. I found freedom in appreciating my body beyond conventional beauty standards. Yet, this liberation was accompanied by anxiety. I feared that my evolving, imperfect body would be scrutinised by family and friends back home, where traditional values reign. This duality, liberation in London and anxiety rooted in my upbringing, has woven a complex narrative around my BI. It represents a journey of self-discovery intertwined with cultural transition, societal expectations, and personal acceptance. Each step shapes not only how I perceive my body but also how I navigate the balance between newfound freedom and enduring ties to my heritage.

I recognise that my BI is a continuous journey that evolves with age. As I reflect and explore the topic, I observe changes both on a micro level, noticing daily shifts, and on a macro level, witnessing transformations in fundamental beliefs about body beauty. As a middle-adult woman from the post-Soviet region residing in London and undergoing CoP training, I understand that my challenges, along with narratives shared by my therapy clients, have inspired me to delve deeper into this subject. In conducting research, I aimed to collect personal stories and amplify voices to identify shared experiences, seeking to feel less alone in my journey. I hope to apply these insights on a larger scale in my profession, assisting women from post-communist regions in understanding their BI and navigating the complexities of their experiences.

1.8 Researcher's Positioning and the Context of Counselling Psychology

As a trainee Counselling Psychologist committed to self-reflection, my role as a researcher is grounded in the methodological framework of social constructionism. This framework underscores how my upbringing, personal stories, academic background, and

beliefs shape both the organisation and analysis of the study's data, thereby influencing the conclusions drawn. Through my personal reflexive statement, BI emerges as a personally resonant theme, prompting a detailed analysis of its nuances. Accordingly, a central aim of this research is to critically reflect on the choices made throughout the research process, elucidating potential biases and their impact on the exploration of BI. This reflexivity, aligned with social constructionist principles, facilitates the presentation of diverse perspectives in Chapter Four: Analysis.

Recognising the lack of research on EE women and the predominance of quantitative studies, I chose to focus on their underrepresented experiences to contribute to a more nuanced understanding. This inquiry centres on collecting personal narratives that weave together individual body stories, aligning with my epistemological stance shaped by narratives from friends, family, and clients, which underscores the importance of exploring the phenomenon of BI. Additionally, the process of selecting my research theme and participants intertwines with social justice considerations. As a Russian woman navigating a challenging socio-political landscape marked by stereotypes, I feel ethically obligated to amplify the voices of EE females in the UK. This commitment is rooted in my experiences of navigating intersecting identities and addressing prevailing stigmas and disentangling dual body standards. Following the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2021), the research acknowledges the importance of engaging with subjective experiences, respecting diverse world views, and working towards empowerment rather than control. The recent influx of Ukrainian women fleeing war (Selberg, 2024) has further underscored my relevance in contributing to the field. Out of five interview participants, two were Ukrainian, which fostered empathy and a shared humanity despite geopolitical tensions, guiding my development of inclusive therapeutic practices.

In CoP, adopting post-modern feminist perspectives is crucial for examining fundamental power dynamics and societal norms that influence the BI experiences of EE women. By challenging patriarchal ideals, we can understand how these factors shape women's self-perceptions. A person-centred approach in clinical practice validates women's experiences and encourages agencies, providing a supportive environment to explore societal beauty standards, cultural pressures, and internalised misogyny. In addition, emphasis on systemic inequalities promotes social change for body positivity and inclusivity. This

includes advocating for media diversity and supporting policies that challenge narrow beauty ideals.

To conduct ethical research, I prioritise participant well-being, informed consent, and confidentiality while mitigating potential harm (BPS, 2014). Amplifying EE women's voices and collaborating with community organisations enriches the research, facilitating meaningful dialogue and social change. Ultimately, studying BI among EE women upholds principles of social justice, equity, and inclusion, contributing to interventions that promote empowerment and well-being central to the field of CoP.

1.9 Chapter Summary

Regardless of the region, age and historical time, most real human bodies differ from imposed ideals. Today the constant pressure from society and the inundation of social media images can lead to distress, self-disappointment, self-hatred (Robertson & Thomson, 2014) and vast number of practices aimed at "improving" our bodies, as simple as make-up, dieting, exercising and more serious as plastic surgeries (Hodgkinson., 2005). Despite the significant impact of BI on people's lives, the experience of women suffering from body image dissatisfaction (BID) and how it impacts one's sense of self-agency is poorly understood (Budgeon, 2003). Numerous studies show that, apart from improving practices, it leads to various psychological difficulties and disorders, including depression, anxiety, social anxiety, low self-esteem, and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) (Manaf et al., 2016; Prnjak et al., 2022). However, the experiences of EE women living in the UK remain underexplored in psychological and CoP literature. Much existing research centres on Western populations, often overlooking the sociocultural contexts that shape BI experiences among EE women. These women face unique challenges, including conflicting cultural messages about appearance, acculturation stress, and the internalisation of Western beauty ideals. Neoliberal discourses that promote individualism and self-optimisation can exacerbate BID and self-surveillance (Chowdhury, 2022; Coffey, 2024). Such intersecting pressures often contribute to identity fragmentation, psychological distress, heightened self-monitoring, and a chronic BID (Bordo, 2023; Robertson & Thomson, 2014**)**. It is the intersection of these cultural, psychological, and social stressors that makes this issue particularly relevant to CoP, which is

committed to understanding psychological distress within social and cultural contexts and to providing holistic, client-centred therapeutic support.

Understanding how these women navigate the complex interplay between societal expectations and personal identity will help to shed light on the nuanced challenges they face. Understanding the complex layers of BI narratives is essential not only for individual well-being but also for promoting a more inclusive and compassionate societal outlook, as well as for deepening insight into the intricate connection between BI and self-agency. By prioritising the voices of EE women and contextualising their experiences within wider sociocultural and political frameworks, this study seeks to enrich CoP by providing a more comprehensive perspective on BI-related distress. In doing so, the study supports the field's commitment to diversity, reflexivity, and the development of contextually grounded psychological interventions that resonate with clients' lived realities.

1.10 Structure of the Thesis

In the following sections, Chapter Two: Literature Review will provide a thorough examination of existing research, theories, and insights related to BI, critically examining and synthesising the literature to establish a foundational understanding for subsequent chapters. Chapter Three: Methodology will detail the selected methodologies, including NA and DPNA, explaining the rationale behind these choices to clarify the research process. This chapter will outline the methodological framework aligning with the research objectives and CoP values.

As the narrative continues in Chapter Four: Analysis, attention will shift to the analytical examination of research results, investigating patterns, themes, and insights from the data to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the findings. Finally, Chapter Five: Discussion will dissect and contextualise these findings, exploring their broader implications in the academic realm and potential real-world applications. The concluding summary will encapsulate the study's contributions and synthesise key takeaways, laying the groundwork for future research effort.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to the chapter

This Literature Review chapter traces the evolution of BI research from its inception to the present, examining the emergence of the BI phenomenon. It explores the philosophical foundations and theoretical underpinnings, focusing on central debates, such as the understanding of BID, its prevalence, and its impact on women's lives. The chapter also analyses the intricate interaction of socio-cultural, psychological, and biological factors influencing women's BI. By critically evaluating existing research, it uncovers connections between these factors and identifies gaps in research on BI and BID among underrepresented middle-adult EE females. Finally, it assesses the impact of relocation from Eastern to Western Europe on BI and highlights areas needing further exploration to enhance the understanding of BI perceptions among middle-adult EE women.

2.2 Philosophical Foundations and Emergence of the Body Image Phenomenon

Philosophical interest in the body, BI, and embodiment began with Plato, who saw the body as a vessel for sensation, separate from intellectual pursuits (Carone, 2005). Descartes later reinforced this separation through mind-body dualism, emphasising the divide between mental intention and physical form (Rozemond, 1999). However, in the 20th century, thinkers challenged dualistic views, suggesting that human identity and consciousness are deeply embodied. For example, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1965) exemplifies this shift, emphasising the unity of body and experience and Schilder (1999), who defined it as a mental representation of one's own body. In *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*, Schilder (1999) investigated how people understand, experience, and interact with their bodies on three levels: libidinal, psychological and sociological and coined the term *body image* (Schilder, 1999). He explored the dynamic interplay between the physical body and the subjective, often complex, mental image an individual holds of that body. In line with Schilder, Dworkin and Kerr (1987) further defined BI as the internal perception of external appearance, underscoring its dynamic and cognitive dimensions. However, Rosen et al. (1989) and Sands (2000) suggested this view may overly focus on cognition, overlooking BI's complexity. Cash (2002) later developed a structural-functional model, viewing BI through a cognitive behavioural lens that emphasises behavioural and thought patterns—a perspective further expanded by Cash and Smolak (2011) and Joo et al. (2018) with mental,

sensory, and somatic dimensions. Still, a focus solely on internal perceptions may miss BI's emotional, social, and cultural dimensions (Orbach, 2018; Wolf, 2013). Ferguson (1997) and Massumi (2002) stressed BI's transient and evolving nature, emphasising its fluidity. This approach, however, may downplay enduring BI struggles, particularly among those deeply impacted by societal and cultural influences (Giddens, 2023; Tiggemann, 2004). A balanced view would integrate both BI's evolving and persistent aspects for a fuller understanding (Cash & Grasso, 2005; Haworth-Hoeppner, 2000). Featherstone (2006) highlighted BI's duality, suggesting that we both possess and are our body, a concept that enriches understanding but may be challenging to measure across cultures (Coffey, 2021). These diverse perspectives reveal BI as a complex blend of perceptions, experiences, and memories that can be both fluid and stable (Cash, 2004; Orbach, 2019; Schilder, 1999). The diversity of definitions illustrates the evolving nature of the phenomenon, prompting scholars to consistently refine their comprehension of the BI construct. This thorough exploration of BI crystallised my understanding, leading me to consider BI as a multifaceted blend of perceptions, experiences, and memories. It could be both transient, ever-changing, and evolving. This perspective is mainly drawn from the works of Cash (2004), Orbach (2019), and Schilder (1999). This rationale shapes my decision to delve into personal narratives as the primary research methodology, a focus to be expounded upon in Chapter Three: Methodology.

2.3 Fluid Identities and Body Image in a Neoliberal Context

Understanding identity is crucial to exploring how individuals experience and make sense of their bodies. From a social constructionist perspective, identity is not a fixed or inherent trait but is actively shaped, performed, and negotiated through social interactions and cultural contexts (Burr, 2015). This dynamic view of identity aligns with Butler's (2025) theory of performativity, which argues that identity is constituted through repeated actions, gestures, and norms, rather than emanating from a stable inner self. These concepts are particularly relevant in the context of body image identity, which refers to how individuals construct and express their sense of self in relation to their physical appearance, shaped by both internalised ideals and external social feedback (Grogan, 2021). Women, in particular, often engage in embodied practices such as grooming, dieting, or posing in efforts to align

with culturally sanctioned beauty standards, performing bodily identities that are socially recognisable and valued.

Within this context, the body becomes a key site for identity formation, where appearance and self-discipline are seen as indicators of moral and social worth (Butler, 2025). Recent studies highlight how neoliberal culture fosters ‘self-othering,’ wherein individuals internalise idealised standards and scrutinise aspects of themselves that deviate from these norms, leading to practices aimed at aligning with the ‘ideal’ neoliberal subject (Chowdhury et al., 2025). This dynamic is particularly evident in digital spaces, where social media platforms intensify these processes by promoting narrow, often racialised and gendered, beauty standards that heighten the pressure to conform (Turkle, 2011). In this sense, digital technologies enable the construction of multiple, often curated, versions of the self. Online platforms position physical appearance as a central marker of identity, continually shaped by visual culture and the feedback of others. In these contexts, the body functions not only as a site of self-expression but also as a means of achieving social validation. Within this context, BI identity becomes a fluid, performative negotiation which is shaped by embodied practices, digital interactions, and the ongoing pursuit of socially constructed ideals (Chowdhury et al., 2025).

More recent research explores the concept of BI through the lens of neoliberalism which could be described as a theory that assumes the body is an individual responsibility, self-surveillance, and moral worth (Gill, 2021). Individuals are assumed to see their bodies as “projects” to be managed and optimised through beauty enhancements, diets, sport, and consumption in order to follow socially approved body and beauty ideals (Elias et al., 2017). Thus, this concept advocates for the idea that our bodies' form, shape, and beauty is a result of personal choices, obscuring the structural and socio-economic factors that influence embodiment (Gill, 2021). The body, in this context, becomes a form of capital and an expression of one’s success, discipline, and self-control, where failing to achieve normative ideals is often interpreted as a moral failure (Rose Spratt, 2023). Women are encouraged to view beauty work as a form of empowerment, while still being bound by consumer-driven ideals of attractiveness (Gill, 2021), dominant norms of slimness, fitness, and femininity (Bordo, 1993). These expectations often become internalised, resulting in forms of embodiment that are tightly controlled and commodified (Davies et al., 2005). In this context,

embodiment encompasses not only the lived, sensory experience of inhabiting a body, but also the ways in which bodies are shaped by broader socio-cultural and political systems.

Recent studies continue to explain these trends. For example, Gillman (2024) examines lifestyle influencers on social media and shows how they promote neoliberal ideas by encouraging women to take responsibility for their health and looks, presenting physical success as a result of personal effort. Similarly, Monteverde (2024) analyses the TV show Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian, showing how it supports neoliberal views of self-improvement and body change through expert advice and self-control. These examples show how neoliberal thinking shapes current ideas about BI and embodiment, treating the body as something to be constantly managed and shaped to fit market-driven ideals.

2.4 Body Image Dissatisfaction

While many see their bodies as a personal statement or a source of pleasure or pride, it can often be a significant source of suffering for those dissatisfied with their BI. BID can be characterised as having a negative affect, cognitions, evaluations and personal attitudes towards one's appearance, body shape, size and how it measures up against sociocultural BI ideals (Cash, 1994; Stice & Shaw 2002). BID includes the perceived discrepancy between the "ideal" and actual body and causes dissatisfaction, emotional discomfort and often lead to various unhealthy behaviours such as restrictive eating, excessive exercising and unprescribed plastic surgeries (Grogan, 2021). This experience of disparity between real and ideal body proved to be common among all body types regardless of Body Mass Index (BMI; a metric used to evaluate a person's weight relative to their height) and supported by various studies (Mahfouz et al., 2018; Robertson & Thomson, 2014). Moreover, Ogden et al. (1992) and Mahfouz et al. (2018) note that perceived BI and perceived body size are often based on feelings rather than evidence (such as BMI). Furthermore, BID includes the personal evaluation of one's appearance, body shape, its functionality and how well it conforms to culturally accepted beauty standards (Al Sulaimi et al., 2022; Cash, 1994). However, BID may coexist with neutral or positive feelings about certain areas of the body, a nuance not captured by common definitions of BID (Kostanski, 2004). While traditional definitions of BID have been valuable in shaping our understanding of the concept, they often overlook the distinct sociocultural pressures faced by individuals in higher-weight bodies. These pressures

extend beyond the pursuit of thinness as a symbol of attractiveness and social acceptance, encompassing the stigmatisation of fatness, frequently framed within health-related discourses (Rodgers et al., 2021). Recognising these complex attitudes requires a more comprehensive approach to BI, which has not been thoroughly examined in the current literature (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). This deeper understanding could be achieved through holistic methods, such as narrative inquiry, to examine how life experiences influence fluctuations in BI disturbance within social contexts.

2.4.1 Female Prevalence of Body Image Dissatisfaction and Its Effects

BID is prevalent across diverse populations, regardless of body shape or size (Walker et al., 2018), and negatively impacts various demographic groups, including those defined by gender, cultural background, socioeconomic status, and education level (Cash, 2004; Green & Pritchard, 2003; Roberts et al., 2006; Wingood et al., 2002). In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee launched the "Changing the Perfect Picture" inquiry in April 2021 to examine BID's effects on vulnerable populations. Prior to the pandemic, studies indicated that 61% of adults and 66% of children reported negative feelings about their BI, particularly among women, individuals with disabilities, and transgender people.

Women show a higher susceptibility to BID, as noted in various studies (Kostanski et al., 2004; Stice & Shaw, 2002). A 2020 survey by the Equalities Committee identified that 6 out of 10 females in the UK experience BID (House of Commons, Equalities Committee, 2020). A meta-analysis confirmed greater BID in women compared to men (He et al., 2020) and reinforced findings from previous studies (Green & Pritchard, 2003; Lacroix et al., 2023; Al Riyami, et al., 2024; Vartanian et al., 2001). Additionally, a comprehensive review of 222 studies over 50 years revealed that women have a greater psychological investment in body shape and size (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998), as supported by other studies, leading to unhealthy practices in the pursuit of unattainable ideals (Cash, 2004; Halliwell, 2013).

BID is not merely a personal concern; its repercussions extend to both psychological and physical well-being, resulting in distorted behaviours (Jiménez-Morcillo et al., 2024; Nademin et al., 2010) and significantly impacting overall quality of life (Nayir et al., 2016). A sentiment echoed by Mond et al. (2013), whose quantitative study with 638 participants

aged 19-44 unveiled the influential role of BID on quality of life. Mond et al. (2013) argue that BID was most associated with items related to psychosocial functioning, higher risks of physical health and mental health impairments. For instance, women grappling with BID are susceptible to heightened negative affect, including depression and anxiety (Jiménez-Morcillo et al., 2024; Stice et al., 2000; Welsh, 2009). Research shows how this can serve as a catalyst for social anxiety, subsequently restricting social interactions (Aderka et al., 2014; Brausch & Muehlenkamp, 2007; Manaf et al., 2016). Furthermore, BID is intricately linked with poor self-concept and low self-esteem, crucial components influencing mental well-being (Farrar et al., 2015). Research indicates that females with diminished self-esteem are prone to reporting BID (Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002), alone with sexual dysfunction, and weight concerns (Husain et al., 2023). The relationship between BID and negative affect remains unclear. Cash (2004) and Luqman & Dixit (2017) emphasise the bidirectional nature of this relationship, yet they do not provide conclusive evidence on whether BID leads to negative affect or vice versa.

Moving beyond psychological implications, BID intertwines with negative and addictive behaviours, particularly drinking and smoking (Strand et al., 2021; Nademin et al., 2010). The reluctance of women to quit smoking due to fears of weight gain (White, McKee & O'Malley, 2007) underscores the intricate relationship between BID and addictive habits. Addressing BID has proven instrumental in smoking cessation (Levine et al., 2001; Perkins et al., 2001). Furthermore, evidence hints at a relationship between BID and alcohol consumption, although causation remains unclear (Kim & Kim, 2015). There is evidence that BID is associated with social media addiction (Brasil et al., 2024; Rodgers et al., 2013; Yurtdaş-Depboylu et al., 2022;) and exercise addiction (Freire et al., 2020). For example, Edlund et al. (2022) explored the connections between BID, compulsive exercise, and self-reported depression symptoms among 4262 Swedish university students. The study indicated that women showed greater BID levels than males, and this dissatisfaction, along with compulsive exercise, correlated with self-reported depression symptoms in a non-clinical population.

One of the most serious implications of BID is its association with an increased risk of eating disorders (EDs) such as anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder (Levine & Smolak, 2010; Mond et al., 2007; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2011; Sattler et al., 2020;

Thompson & Stice, 2001) and disordered eating (Cooley & Toray, 2001; Perez & Joiner Jr, 2003; Walker et al., 2018). For instance, Lewis and Cachelin (2001) explored differences in BI pursuit of thinness, and eating attitudes among middle-aged and elderly women. The middle-aged cohort (ages 50-65) exhibited greater tendencies toward thinness, disinhibited eating, and interoceptive confusion compared to the elderly group (66 years and older), who nonetheless showed body size preferences and dissatisfaction similar to younger women. The study indicated a positive link between fear of aging and disordered eating, suggesting that sociocultural standards influence older women across generations in comparable ways. Furthermore more recent study by Górskaet al. (2023) underscored the potential harm of constant exposure to idealised body images, which can exacerbate BID and contribute to unhealthy eating behaviours among adult women.

Research on middle-adult women remains scarce, but some studies indicate that they are affected by EDs similarly to younger or middle-aged females (Mangweth-Matzek et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2023). Unhealthy eating habits among adult women may often go unreported due to social desirability bias, leading them to underreport behaviours that deviate from societal ideals of health and appearance (Burke & Carman, 2017). Some women may even normalise unhealthy behaviours within their social circles, failing to recognise these patterns as problematic (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Further research is needed to unravel the complex relationships between EDs, past psychological stress, physical and mental health, and disordered eating (Barnes & Caltabiano, 2017).

2.4.2 Middle-Adult Females' Body Image Dissatisfaction

The observed prevalence of BID among women, coupled with the significant gap in research focusing on middle-adult females, underscores an urgent need to address the experiences of women in their 30s. Women undergo profound developments and changes in BI throughout their lives, psychologically, socially, and physically resulting in evolving interpretations of their body experiences (Lee & Damhorst, 2022; Ricciardelli et al., 2003). While correlational studies indicate that women of all ages confront body-related concerns at least once in their lives (Lewis & Cachelin, 2001; Smolak, 2004), most research on adult BI predominantly examines younger students and utilises narrow age ranges, typically focusing on those between 18 and 25 years (Tiggemann, 2004; Tiggemann & Slevec, 2012), or on

women in their 50s (Tiggemann, 2004). This focus neglects the experiences of women aged 30 to 40, a critical period marked by various factors, such as aging, pregnancy, pressures regarding fertility, and age-related health challenges that profoundly influence perceptions of BI (Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Mangweth-Matzek et al., 2013; Saylan & Soyyiğit, 2023). Despite this, research specifically targeting women in this age range remains notably limited.

Indeed, studies suggest that women aged 30 to 40 exhibit some of the greatest degrees of BID, frequently expressing dissatisfaction with their BI and engaging in weight loss attempts (Hockey et al., 2021; Runfola et al., 2013; Ziebland et al., 2002). Levinson's model (1986) further elucidates this phenomenon, suggesting that the transition from young to middle adulthood (ages 33-40) triggers role conflicts arising from various biological, cultural, and social changes. Therefore, there is a need for further research focused specifically on this age group to fully comprehend their unique experiences related to BI.

2.5 Body Image Among Women in Their 30s

2.5.1 Bio-Psycho-Socio-Cultural Perspective on Middle-Adult Women

Women aged 30 to 40 often face unique challenges that complicate their BI experiences due to various biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors. Understanding their experiences holistically is crucial. The bio-psycho-socio-cultural model, endorsed by the BPS, serves as a framework for exploring the BI experiences of women in this age group. This model considers the interplay of different influences, recognising that individual experiences stem from a complex web of factors. Its strength lies in providing a nuanced understanding of BI concerns, enabling tailored interventions that address the unique combination of biological predispositions, psychological processes, social interactions, and cultural influences (Bolton, 2022). Furthermore, its cultural sensitivity enhances relevance across diverse populations, promoting preventive measures and targeted interventions that account for societal norms and expectations. This holistic approach aligns with the principles of CoP, emphasising a comprehensive view of mental health. Studies by Hoffman & Driscoll (2000) and Robert-McComb & Massey-Stokes (2014) underscore the necessity of this comprehensive perspective on BI. However, Alvarez (2012) argues that the model neglects the subjectivity of lived experiences, a point that will be further examined in the upcoming methodology section.

2.5.2 Biological and Psychological Factors

Women in their late 30s undergo numerous biological and physiological changes, such as wrinkles, grey hair, and weight fluctuations, which can lead to negative affect, BID, and anxiety (Boyd, Bee, & Johnson, 2015; Helman, 1995; Barrett & Toothman, 2018; Forney et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 1998). The first signs of aging and noticeable weight gain trigger concerns about meeting societal standards of youthfulness, particularly due to the pervasive influence of media portraying idealised images (Pruis & Janowsky, 2010). This emphasis on idealised beauty can lead to increased self-scrutiny and social comparison, especially with younger women, ultimately impacting their self-worth (Kilpela et al., 2015).

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1957) proposes that individuals assess their self-worth by comparing themselves to others, significantly influencing their self-perception. This theory provides insight into how women frequently compare themselves across various attributes, including BI. In this context, a significant study by Cash et al. (1983) presented women with magazine photographs under three conditions: solely attractive figures, attractive figures with professional models, and non-attractive figures. Participants in the solely attractive condition rated their own attractiveness lower compared to those in the other two conditions, highlighting the greater impact of peer comparisons rather than comparisons with professional models. Moreover, more recent study by Betz, Sabik, and Ramsey (2019) reconfirmed these ideas and found that viewing idealised images such as thin, athletic, or curvy bodies can lead to increased social comparison, which in turn negatively affects body satisfaction. This effect was particularly pronounced among women with higher levels of thin-ideal internalisation.

Consequently, this comparison leads to BID and is linked to various negative emotional consequences, such as persistent low mood, depression and heightened suicidal thoughts (Akram et al., 2022; Satwik et al., 2024). Moreover, some studies showed that ageing women become more prone to anxiety and perfectionism as well as still strive of young slim looking bodies which becoming less possible (Midlarsky & Nitzburg, 2008). Overall, mentioned above physiological changes and comparisons as per Dittmar and Howard (2004), contribute to BID through thin-young-looking standards, triggering a range of adverse psychological and cognitive issues.

The repercussions of BID extend beyond psychological aspects to negatively influence health behaviours and outcomes and may lead to increased controlling behaviours aiming to reverse or regulate these changes (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). This may contribute to increased engagement in unhealthy weight management practices, smoking behaviours, and decreased physical activity among young and middle aged (>50 y.o) adult women (Bouzas et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2005; Shagar et al., 2017). Despite the existing literature examining BID and its associations in younger female populations, there is a notable lack of research addressing BI disturbances in adult women, particularly those in their 30s, whose experiences may differ significantly from those of younger women.

According to Johnston-Robledo et al. (2007), reproductively mature female bodies, like those of younger females, may be similarly vulnerable to sexual objectification, resulting in comparable psychological experiences. *Objectification theory* (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) examines societal trends, particularly towards women, as objects judged mainly on physical appearance, fuelling BI concerns. Simultaneously, females in their 30s experience "biological clock" pressures – women's "ability to conceive and bear a child". Mohapatra (2014) and Wagner et al. (2019) defined this age as a sensitive time for women, being fertile yet close to menopause, which could be accompanied by socio-cultural pressures. Yopo Díaz (2021) highlights a recent increase in biological-clock-related anxiety and its impact on BI perceptions. Additionally, Brown and Patrick (2018) argue that this anxiety is reinforced by the crossover with social and cultural environments in which the accepted reproductive age is implicitly defined. This leads to questions of whether these factors change perceptions of BI. Additionally, societal expectations regarding starting a family can contribute to the complexity of BI adding more pressure (Yopo Díaz, 2021). The pressure to have children by a certain age can influence how individuals perceive their bodies, especially if fertility concerns arise.

2.5.3 Socio-Cultural Pressures

Orbach (2019) posits that bodies are socially constructed through the reproduction of societal discussions and norms. This concept particularly relevant for women in their 30s as they grapple with societal expectations around career success, marriage, family, and personal fulfilment (Stewart et al., 2001). They face pressure to balance professional achievements

with family life, along with expectations to reach certain milestones by specific ages. This includes a growing set of responsibilities (Mehta et al., 2020) and a demand for financial stability and success (Saucier, 2004; Knecht & Freund, 2016). Such sociocultural pressures can lead to stress and impact BI, as women strive to meet external expectations.

Orbach (1998) argues that unrealistic beauty standards become especially poignant for women in their 30s, who grapple with societal notions of an idealised BI influenced by media representations and prevailing norms that favour thin, youthful appearances. A study by Marques et al. (2022) demonstrated that higher social media use was associated with increased BID over time among adults. This relationship was particularly pronounced in women, suggesting that continuous exposure to curated online content can exacerbate BI concerns. This struggle is compounded by the intersection of career aspirations and expectations of femininity, which can further impact self-perception and contribute to BID. Additionally, societal beauty standards and perceptions of aging may create unique pressures during this phase of life. Research indicates that these pressures significantly influence women's behaviours and their desire to prevent aging. Consequently, some women may resort to unhealthy habits, such as restrictive eating (Bandelin-Franke et al., 2023). However, the research on BID and aging anxiety is inconsistent. While Slevec and Tiggemann (2010) found no link between BID and aging anxiety, Dittmar and Howard (2004) identified that middle-adult females internalising thin-body ideals through social comparison represent a risk factor for BID. Overall, the research indicates that age, physical and psychological aspects, social pressures, and cultural factors all contribute to BID; however, the influence of these factors varies significantly depending on the culture and society in which a woman is born and lives (Kilpela et al., 2015).

2.6 Western European Body Ideals Compared to Eastern European Body Image Standards

As supported by numerous studies (Bordo, 2004; McKinley, 2006; Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014) Western societies promote a "thin-young-looking" body ideal which is unattainable for most (Abdoli et al., 2024; Mussell, Binford & Fulkerson, 2000; Smolak, 2004). For example, the international 'Body Project' (Swami et al., 2010), a large cross-cultural study involving 7,434 women from around the world, showed that Western societies

are more inclined to promote thinner BI standards based on individualistic values of attractiveness, success, and gender equality, prioritising personal needs and goals over those of the group.

While Western ideals of beauty emphasise personal success, individualism, and gender equality (Swami et al., 2010), the ideals in post-Soviet countries are more closely aligned with collectivist values characterised by homogeneity and male dominance (Inglehart, 2006). However, literature addressing BI in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is sparse. My literature search revealed that in the 1930s USSR, the depiction of the female body was often characterised as the "worker-peasant type" (Vygodskaia-Rust, 2012). Dashkova (1999) described this ideal as featuring females with broad faces, an absence of cosmetics, and large, coarse features. Typically, the female body was depicted as stocky with a strong build, short neck, and broad shoulders. Clothing was often voluminous and baggy, designed to lack obvious feminine qualities and to promote a more androgynous appearance, thus emphasising the idea of being a "comrade." However, from the 70s, after the Soviet team's success in the Olympics, the image of the female body in society began to shift towards a more athletic ideal (Kostyaev, 2009). Magazines and movies typically promoted gymnasts with toned arms and legs as the new ideal for women's bodies (Muhamatulin, 2019).

Women who grew up in the USSR were largely shielded from Western mass media. During this time, female beauty was associated with maintaining a "healthy bloodline" and the woman's role in the heterosexual script (Bilukha & Utermohlen, 2002). In alignment with these values, women were taking on a more passive role, except for their ability to use their bodies to attract men. Moreover, the socialist era's lack of individual involvement in public life contributed to the emasculation of men and led to the rise of strong patriarchal tendencies in EE countries (Watson, 1993). EE societies tend to be more male-dominated and display stronger power dynamics between men and women (Basabe & Ros, 2005). For example, an online survey study by Yoon et al. (2020) on 236 participants revealed that patriarchal values were associated with increased depressive symptoms. Another example, a cross-cultural study by Izydorczyk et al. (2023) examining Polish, Ukrainian, and Italian women found that family pressure significantly influences BI, with Polish and Ukrainian women showing a strong correlation between family expectations and concerns about appearance and body

satisfaction. This suggests that in EE societies, familial expectations play a critical role in shaping women's self-perception and mental health.

Moreover, EE people tend to lean more towards traditional family values, prioritising the needs of the group or family over their own personal needs (Inglehart 2006). Thus, women depend on men economically and may experience more pressure to attract men for financial stability. Recent studies continue to highlight the persistence of traditional gender roles in EE societies. For example, Myck et al., (2024) found that a significant proportion of citizens in countries like Belarus, Poland and Russia believe that a woman's primary role is to care for children at home. These traditional views reinforce patriarchal structures, making EE females more vulnerable to body standard pressures and raising questions about the impact of patriarchy on the experiences and wellbeing of EE women.

However, after the 90s and the collapse of the USSR, Western media rapidly spread to EE countries and a societal transformation from socialism to liberal democracy began, all of which increased the influence of Western media and sparked the promotion of unrealistic standards of thin-young looking bodies (McKinley, 2006). The societal transformation largely brought about by lessening media restrictions and increased access to global media (Hockey et al., 2021) led to EE individuals internalising Western body standards, leading to an increase in BID and appreciation of a certain feminine beauty (Funk & Mueller, 2018). For example, Rieves and Cash (1996) found that EE college females post USSR dissolution who adhere to more traditional perspectives on gender roles in sexual relationships were more likely to demonstrate maladaptive BI attitudes and experiences, such as heightened dissatisfaction, emotional attachment, and stronger internalisation of the thin ideal. The exposure to Western standards of body and beauty standards led to a blending of traditional collectivist values with individualistic Western ideals, resulting in a complex BI landscape. For instance, research comparing Polish, Italian, and Ukrainian women revealed significant differences in BI perceptions, internalisation of athletic ideals, and family influences, highlighting the diverse impacts of cultural and familial factors on BI (Izydorczyk et al., 2023). Examining such portrayals raises questions about the impact on perceptions, reinforcing cultural biases and potentially influencing societal attitudes towards EE individuals. Importantly, these depictions can significantly impact the self-perception of EE women, shaping their views of their bodies and reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The inquiry

arises regarding EE women currently living in Western Europe, particularly in London. These EE women navigate a complex landscape of cultural stereotypes as they grapple with dual cultural standards, multiple body ideals, and potentially conflicting views on beauty. They also face challenges of integration, encounter eroticised body representations in media, and the complex interplay of these influences may have a profound impact on EE females.

2.7 Effects of Immigration on Mental Health and Body Image of Eastern Europeans in the UK

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, individuals from post-Soviet countries have encountered new cultural, political, and social norms, particularly those who immigrated to Western Europe. Despite Eastern Europeans being the second-largest immigrant community in the UK (Nowicka et al., 2018; Sadurski, 2004), there is a notable lack of research on their mental health. Limited studies indicate poor mental health among Eastern Europeans in the UK, with Osipovič et al. (2013) and Tobi et al. (2010) highlighting language barriers that hinder effective communication about health concerns, making mental health services less accessible. Qualitative research by Madden et al. (2017) found heightened anxiety and frustration among these immigrants regarding UK health services. Further, a meta-analysis by Poppleton et al. (2022) of 65 publications confirmed widespread dissatisfaction and distrust, identifying numerous obstacles to obtaining health services among Eastern Europeans in the UK.

Research on the impact of immigration on BI shows that relocating to another country can significantly alter body standards (Mazur et al., 2020; Wingood et al., 2002). For instance, Swami et al. (2021) found that individuals from lower socioeconomic status (SES) countries often appreciate larger body sizes initially, but their preferences shift toward smaller-bodied ideals after moving to higher SES countries. Women migrating to the West face substantial cultural shifts largely shaped by Western advertising and entertainment that promote an idealised image of youth, slenderness, Whiteness, and happiness (Bilukha & Utermohlen, 2002; Thomas & Kleyman, 2020; Wykes & Gunter, 2004). This can intensify pressures to conform to beauty standards, particularly for women from Eastern Europe, where economic conditions and societal expectations can challenge self-image and self-esteem.

Transition to a new cultural context can enhance participation in social comparisons (Abdoli et al., 2024; Doris et al., 2015). Brosan et al. (2008) noted that relocation often triggers self-evaluation, prompting individuals to focus on body standards, which can lead to "negative private body talk" and self-comparison (Jakatdar et al., 2006). EE women might compare their cultural norms with those in the UK, influencing their body perceptions relative to societal expectations. While some may assimilate and adopt Western body ideals, others may resist and maintain a strong connection to their EE roots (Bakhshi, 2011; Soh et al., 2006; Sussman et al., 2007). The adaptation process significantly impacts psychological well-being; positive integration can foster a sense of belonging, whereas challenges in navigating dual cultural influences may harm mental health, including BI satisfaction (Kodippili et al., 2024; Sussman et al., 2007).

In conclusion, the experiences of EE women migrating to the UK reflect a complex interplay between their cultural backgrounds and Western culture, impacting their BI perceptions. Competing cultural values and historical trends create conflicting beauty ideals, resulting in dualistic trends within EE societies (Stukuls, 1999). This dynamic leads to contradictions between body acceptance and self-improvement. Given the limited research on BI among women relocating to the West, it is crucial to examine the various factors shaping their experiences.

2.8 Chapter Summary

The current literature review reveals the varied definitions of BI, illustrating that BI is non-dichotomous, non-linear, and intertwined with subjective bio-psycho-socio-cultural contexts. It highlights the prevalence and impact of BID on women's lives, emphasising BI and BID's evolving nature throughout life as our bodies change. Qualitative research is essential for exploring the diversity of BI experiences (Warren & Karner, 2010; Hosseini & Padhy, 2019). Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1998) noted that biological, psychological, and socio-cultural factors converge to form unique BI experiences. They further suggest that BI research requires a perspective that incorporates both unique experiences and developmental stages to understand individuals' life contexts and lifespan continuum, where narrative appears to be an effective means of discovery. Additionally, the review highlights that Western body and beauty standards, rooted in individualistic values of attractiveness, success, and gender equality, contrast with the values and gender roles of collectivist EE society

(Inglehart, 2006) which exhibit significant power dynamics between men and women, leading to male dominance (Basabe & Ros, 2005; Inglehart, 2006).

As Cash (2004) and Inglehart (2006) point out, there is a notable deficiency in BI research within various European cultures. Most studies have focused on Western populations, particularly Americans and Western Europeans, questioning the applicability of this knowledge to other cultural settings. This gap is particularly pronounced in EE countries, especially those newly established in the 1990s following the USSR's dissolution. This need for expanded research is supported by Eiroá Orosa (2013), Koposov et al. (2022), Lukács et al. (2021), and Oshio & Meshkova (2012), highlighting the necessity for understanding BI within specific EE cultures, especially regarding EE women relocating to Western Europe and their perceptions of BI in adapting to these new cultural contexts. Overall, the literature review underscores a deficiency in qualitative BI studies, particularly for middle-adult EE women in their 30s.

2.9 Rationale for the Study

EE women, situated within a unique cultural context marked by historical nuances and societal norms, have distinctive BI formation and perception influenced by this backdrop. Understanding these cultural intricacies offers insights into the shaping of beauty standards and body ideals in the region. Additionally, the rapid globalisation of Eastern Europe has introduced Western beauty ideals, creating an opportunity to explore how global influences intersect with local cultures, impacting women's perceptions of their bodies (Bilukha & Utermohlen, 2002). Investigating BI intricacies can provide fresh perspectives on mental health and well-being, fostering culturally adopted interventions. Furthermore, the study may shed light on how EE women, experiencing significant historical changes such as political transitions, economic shifts, and relocation to the West, have had their societal values, beauty standards, and gender roles influenced, all impacting BI perceptions. This research also holds significance for public health and CoP as negative BI links to mental health issues and other health concerns. Understanding BI factors among EE women in the UK is crucial for targeted public health initiatives, interventions, and further contributing to social and gender equality discussions in the field of CoP. By revealing societal expectations on women's appearance, the findings can contribute to fostering a more inclusive and empowering environment. In

summary, studying BI in EE women presents a detailed exploration of the interaction between history, globalisation, culture, and individual experiences, informing culturally sensitive interventions and contributing to discussions on mental health and gender dynamics in CoP (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

2.10 Research Questions and Aims of the Study

This chapter highlights a significant gap in our understanding of BI experiences among EE middle-adult females, who exhibit unique and conflicted relationships with their bodies (Inglehart, 2006). EE culture, historically shaped by patriarchal norms and homogeneous beauty (Davidenko, 2013) and the influence of Western ideals of individualistic values (Swami et al., 2010) has fostered a competitive environment where women, particularly in their 30s, feel pressured to conform to conflicting physical ideals for male attention and identity affirmation. I am interested in how the relocation of EE women to the West impacts their BI construction and self-agency. Bakhshi (2011) suggests that women identifying with their original culture may be partially shielded from Western norms; however, Cheney (2010) argues those who integrate may experience increased BID due to conflicting societal expectations. Furthermore, EE women often face stigma related to their bodies, which are typically eroticised within Western culture (Krivonos & Diatlova, 2020).

This study aims to explore BI narratives from EE women and how cultural standards shape their BI in the UK. My goal is to understand how relocation contributes to their body stories, tracing changes in BI perceptions pre- and post-move while considering the influence of both cultures. I seek to give voice to middle-adult EE women, examining their BI experiences as a coherent narrative. Additionally, I aim to capture how their body stories have evolved through historical, cultural, and societal influences, especially significant life events like their relocation to the West. By unpacking the complex narratives tied to female bodies, I will address the following questions: How do EE middle-adult women in the UK articulate their BI? How do they navigate BI amid sociocultural change? How do their stories reflect the complexity of BI experiences?

My goal is to enhance public awareness about the diversity of female BI experiences, promoting realistic and inclusive perceptions. By illuminating the unique challenges faced by EE women, I aim to highlight overlooked issues related to BI. This awareness can inform the creation of culturally sensitive interventions tailored to the unique needs of EE women,

promoting a more inclusive understanding of beauty and self-worth. The implications of this work may influence health and education policies, advocating for the inclusion of diverse BI perspectives in practitioner training programmes, enhancing support services and fostering societal shifts that promote acceptance of diverse body types across cultures.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the selected methodology for exploring the aforementioned research question. I begin by discussing the epistemological and conceptual underpinnings of my research question and explaining my choice of qualitative methods, specifically NA. Given that NA encompasses a variety of analytical approaches, I justify my selection of DPNA as a suitable method for exploring BI narratives. I then outline the practical aspects of conducting DPNA research and discuss the significance of ethical practice, along with the measures I have taken to ensure the moral conduct of the study. I conclude by emphasising the importance of methodological reflexivity, examining how the research process and the co-construction of narratives are influenced by the researcher's perspectives and decisions, in addition to how I addressed the challenges encountered during the research process.

3.2 Methodological and Epistemological Considerations of the Study

3.2.1 Methodological Shift in Body Image Research

The examination of BI definitions and their evolution, as discussed in the literature review, reveals a dynamic trajectory. Initially focused on the medical realm, BI was predominantly studied through a positivist lens, relying on quantitative methods centred on cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects (Cash, 2004; Thompson et al., 1999). This approach treated the body as an object separate from subjective consciousness, adhering to "epistemological individualism" (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Under this paradigm, phenomena were isolated from sociocultural contexts (Tollefsen, 2002), prioritising mental aspects and concentrating on BID pathology within a medical framework. While quantitative methods enhance our understanding of BI patterns and causal relationships, they also reveal significant perceptual differences among individuals and a high prevalence of BID (Cash, 2004).

However, these methods often overlooked the subjective experience of BI, viewing emotional meanings and interpretations as "contaminants" to objective research, thereby restricting a comprehensive understanding of individual experiences (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Bordo, 2003).

Over the past four decades, the understanding of BI has shifted from a positivist paradigm toward constructionism and relativism, sparking interest in qualitative methodologies and acknowledging the limitations of pure objectivism (Cash, 2004; Piran, 2019; Rice et al., 2021). Criticism of positivist BI research focused on its biases and limited insights into lived experiences, particularly among diverse populations (Richards, 2003). This marked a pivotal shift to a post-modern viewpoint that fosters a more subjective understanding of BI as a multidimensional construct shaped by diverse experiences and complex sociocultural influences, including culture, politics, history, globalisation, and immigration (Massumi, 2002; Orbach, 2019; Kimber et al., 2015). This perspective presents BI as a "multiplicity of truths," challenging comprehensive measurement. These varied definitions prompted reflection on my understanding of BI, leading to its formulation as a flexible, evolving, idiosyncratic, and linguistically influenced construct (Cash, 2004; Grogan, 2006; Orbach, 2019).

Before selecting a methodology, I carefully considered my research objectives to achieve a thorough grasp of the BI narratives of EE middle-adult females (Willig, 2019). This required a nuanced approach that reflected the meanings ascribed to BI by these women. Qualitative methods were particularly suitable, facilitating an in-depth exploration of individual narratives and meanings through detailed reflection and participant interaction. Using open-ended questions within a qualitative framework generates rich, descriptive data, offering valuable insights into context-dependent BI experiences. During interviews, paying attention to both spoken and unspoken indicators is essential for capturing BI narratives, which are often conveyed through language and bodily expressions (Frank, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005). Recognising the evolving nature of BI and the subjective nature of reality, qualitative methods that prioritise storytelling, particularly narrative methodologies grounded in social constructionism, emerged as the most appropriate choice. The rationale for this selection is detailed below.

3.2.2 Underlying Assumptions of Research Inquiry

Exploring "Lifelong Body Image Narratives among Eastern European Females in their 30s," this inquiry sought to delve into the construction of BI through feminist intersectionality and the interpretative processes women employ to comprehend their narratives and connection with their bodies. It also endeavoured to illustrate the malleability and perpetual nature of BI construction, wherein women collaboratively construct their narratives regarding past, present, and future BI. Therefore, the research inquiry rested on three key assumptions:

Exploring "Lifelong Body Image Narratives among Eastern European Females in their 30s," this inquiry sought to understand the construction of BI through an intersectional feminist lens, attending to how gender, migration, cultural background, and socio-political histories interact in shaping women's embodied self-understanding. Drawing on feminist intersectionality, the study emphasises how BI is not a universal or fixed concept but one deeply embedded in the specific cultural, historical, and geographic experiences of women (Bordo, 2023). The methodology was grounded in narrative inquiry, allowing participants to interpret, reflect upon, and co-construct their experiences of BI across time and place. This interpretative process recognises women not merely as subjects but as meaning-makers, whose stories reveal the ongoing negotiation of BI in relation to shifting social norms, aesthetic expectations, and identity positions (Burr, 2015). By focusing on EE women in their 30s who have migrated, the study acknowledges the role of transnational movement and cultural hybridity in shaping bodily narratives highlighting how intersecting factors like post-socialist gender norms, Western beauty ideals, and migratory status inform their perceptions of self and body.

The research inquiry rested on three key assumptions:

1. BI can take on diverse narrative forms, shaped by interpersonal circumstances, making it both multifaceted and continuous.

2. The narratives surrounding BI may undergo transformation and revelation of intricate perspectives as women relocate to different countries.

3. Women who have relocated to a different country might express conflicting and paradoxical ideas and emotions concerning their BI.

3.2.3 Epistemological Considerations and Rationale for Selecting Narrative Analysis

In exploring BI experiences among EE females, I initially considered employing phenomenology, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I was drawn to Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion that we inhabit, rather than possess, our bodies, emphasising the perception of lived experiences within a social context. However, I ultimately opted not to use phenomenology and IPA, as they focus on specific experiences, rich descriptions, and meaning extraction, making them less suitable for understanding the overall narrative structure (Willig, 2013). Moreover, IPA's critical realist ontology and phenomenological epistemology do not align with my perspective, particularly its assumption of a singular truth experienced differently by individuals (Shinebourne, 2011). Further compounding this is phenomenology's limited emphasis on language and non-verbal communication, crucial for understanding co-constructed experiences in BI research (Willig, 2013). In contrast, social constructionism sees language as performative, dynamically shaping experiences.

Through a social constructionist lens, I argue that BI is intricately connected to our surroundings, making socio-cultural factors essential for comprehending the dual-cultural experience of BI, an aspect often overlooked by phenomenology. Social constructionism posits that multiple realities are co-constructed through language (Burr, 2015). This perspective presented a dilemma among thematic analysis (TA), discourse analysis (DA), and NA, all of which align with social constructionism. TA, particularly discursive TA, explores societal discourse themes but risks neglecting individual differences and nuances, potentially failing to capture the complexities of BI. DA examines the co-construction of reality via language (Willig, 2013) and priorities discourses over individual experiences. I found Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) particularly intriguing due to its focus on social factors and power dynamics (Hook, 2007), relevant since young girls develop their BI through societal interactions and discussions on femininity and beauty (Orbach, 1998). However, both DA and FDA emphasise linguistic structures at the expense of personal meanings, which may inadequately explore women's interpretations of their BI (Willig, 2013). Although FDA addresses power dynamics, it often operates under a critical realist ontology (Willig, 2013), in conflict with my view of BI as a fluid, socially constructed, yet subjective experience. To address power dynamics in my research, I will integrate insights from social constructionist feminist theorists such as Orbach (2019) and Bordo (2003). This

integration will help examine how cultural and societal structures influence BI while highlighting participants' unique narratives.

This research examines the BI narratives of EE females who have relocated to the UK, aiming to unravel the complex meanings shaped by both traditional collectivist values and Western standards of thinness and youth. In doing so, it seeks to uncover multiple, potentially contradictory truths within the sociocultural context, highlighting the impact of language, culture, and society on their BI experiences. Given the intricate nature of BI, NA is particularly well-suited for this investigation because it considers social discourse alongside individual, embodied experiences and meanings (Riessman, 2003). Moreover, NA aligns with my epistemological perspective, which is grounded in social constructionism and posits that BI experiences arise from diverse truths within an evolving narrative (Gergen, 2014). This approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of BI's complexity while acknowledging the diverse meanings constructed through language and specific contexts (Sparkes, 2005). By assuming the coexistence of multiple truths, it emphasises the significance of language, culture, and society in shaping individual experiences (Burr, 2015). Consequently, examining the historical, cultural, and social contexts underlying discourse about body, beauty, and sexuality becomes essential (Orbach, 1998). Thus, NA underscores the interplay between the individual and culture, capturing the interconnected factors that influence BI and providing a comprehensive view of the phenomenon (Frank, 2012). Furthermore, it illustrates BI as comprising “overlapping identities,” where each identity holds significance within specific contexts and extends beyond physical boundaries (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). Additionally, NA recognises the co-constructive nature of research, positioning the researcher as an active participant (Willig, 2013). As a result, this methodological approach effectively depicts the contradictory, idiosyncratic, and multi-layered nature of BI, particularly in relation to the dual cultural standards central to my research question. Therefore, NA is the most suitable methodological choice for uncovering how young women construct their BI experiences.

3.3 Method for Analysis

3.3.1 Narrative Analysis

NA, a research method, entails analysing and interpreting stories to glean insights into social and cultural phenomena, aiming to comprehend individuals' experiences and subjective

meanings. In this study, I define *narrative* broadly, encompassing everything from a detailed response to a research question presented in the form of a story to an individual's complete life account (Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) outlines three approaches to NA: thematic, structural and DPNA. While thematic NA focuses on what is being said, structural NA deals with the order and structure of the stories being told. Both of these methodologies seemed too limited in their focus by lacking the interactional and performative aspects of storytelling. For the holistic exploration of BI, I opted to use DPNA. The subsequent paragraph will elucidate the rationale behind this choice and delve into the DPNA process.

3.3.2 Dialogic/Performance Narrative Analysis

Riessman (2008) highlights the dynamic and multilayered nature of DPNA, which often integrates both thematic and structural analyses, as seen in this study. While these analyses focus on the "what" is being told and "how" it is narrated, DPNA also considers the "who" is narrating and influencing the narrative, as well as the "why," thereby providing an in-depth understanding of BI experiences within specific cultural or geographical contexts. In doing so, it allows for a dynamic exploration of how BI narratives are co-constructed in social contexts and highlights how women actively negotiate and reinterpret societal norms in their stories. DPNA emphasises that narratives are shaped by both internal and external dialogues, enabling a comprehensive understanding of cultural expectations surrounding BI. By employing DPNA, researchers can explore how women simultaneously express, challenge, and reshape their BI identities, offering valuable insights into personal agency, social influences, and power dynamics (Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011).

DPNA integrates insights from Bakhtin (1986) and Goffman (2006), merging dialogic and performative concepts. Bakhtin's dialogism highlights the multiplicity of voices in narratives, contributing to the creation of rich, dynamic stories understood through diverse viewpoints. Meanwhile, Goffman's work underscores how social contexts and roles shape storytelling, revealing the interplay between personal identities and societal influences in narrative creation. Furthermore, DPNA recognises that stories are co-constructed, viewing individual narratives as composed of multiple 'voices' (Frank, 2012). This perspective facilitates an exploration of the socio-cultural context of these voices and underscores the interactive nature of research, co-constructed by both participants and the researcher.

Riessman (2008) highlights the significance of researchers' identities in generating and interpreting narrative data. Aligned with Bakhtin's insights, Riessman (2008) acknowledges that analysis extends beyond individual narratives to encompass the dialogue between speakers, researchers, and readers, thereby highlighting the value of the broader societal context. Additionally, DPNA not only acknowledges the multi-voiced nature of BI narratives but also explores the connections between these voices (Frank, 2012). Listening to how these voices interact within a singular narrative is unique to this approach and aligns with my epistemology of social constructionism. In this way, DPNA illustrates the fluidity of BI experiences, reflecting their changing and adaptable nature, as well as their "unfinalisability," indicating that these experiences are never fixed or complete and are subject to ongoing change and reinterpretation (Riessman, 2008).

Finally, DPNA can incorporate visual methods, such as photographs, which effectively anchor discussions on the sensitive topic of BI. Photographs serve as tangible references that reveal subtle complexities and encourage participants to express and explore their BI perceptions more deeply and openly (Mannay, 2015).

3.3.3 Critique of Dialogic/Performance Narrative Analysis

Critics argue that the landscape of DPNA lacks clear guidelines for researchers to pinpoint, identify, or delve into narratives (Chase, 2005). This ambiguity can introduce subjectivity, potentially skewing sample selection and interpretation towards biased outcomes. Such subjectivity may inadvertently omit pivotal perspectives, compromising the objectivity of findings and raising doubts about their reliability and validity. The absence of standardised criteria for narrative inclusion could obstruct study replicability and impede comparisons across various projects (Polkinghorne, 2007). Moreover, by concentrating solely on individual narratives, there's a risk of disregarding contextual elements and privileging individual or researcher viewpoints over broader societal influences, thus oversimplifying intricate social phenomena (Polkinghorne, 2007). Furthermore, the heavy reliance on language within narrative analysis might overshadow non-verbal components essential to the narrative's holistic meaning, posing a threat to its validity (Emden, 1998; Robert & Shenhav, 2014). In the subsequent section, I will elucidate the analytical process, showcasing how these challenges were navigated and mitigated within the scope of my study.

3.4 Research Design

3.4.1 Sampling: Inclusion Criteria and Exclusion Criteria

The current study aimed to recruit EE females who have relocated to and now reside in the UK. To refine the selection criteria, I have narrowed down the eligible countries to Latvia, Moldova, Belarus, and Ukraine. These countries were chosen due to their shared unique socio-cultural and historical background, as well as a commonly used Russian language (Ivanchenko & Chimiris, 2020). This aligns with my epistemological stance (social constructionism) and methodological approach (NA), which underscore the significance of language and socio-cultural setting in exploring the construct of BI.

Additionally, participants were female individuals in their 30s. This decision was motivated by the lack of research on women transitioning from young to middle adulthood and the significance of understanding how their upbringing in EE countries during the Soviet era may have influenced their formation of BI, shaped by social media, parental and peer influences, and cultural norms up to the age of 17 (Smolak, 2004). Thus, the recruitment was focused on females who migrated to the UK after turning 17, and have integrated into the local culture, potentially adopting Western BI ideals (Murray et al., 2014). Participants need to have resided in the UK for a minimum of 4 years, in order to allow for time to said integration to take place (Murray et al., 2014). Furthermore, interviews were conducted in English, and self-reported questionnaires were utilised to assess participants' English language proficiency to ensure they can express themselves freely about their BI experiences. Given NA's emphasis on individual experiences and avoidance of generalisations, a purposive self-selected sample was employed.

Therefore, the study necessitated a sample of individuals who identified as:

- Females being born and raised in Eastern Europe (Belarus, Latvia, Moldova, Ukraine).
- Females who lived in their country of origin at least until the age of 17.
- Females who moved to the UK and lived in the UK at least four years.
- Speak fluent English.
- Aged 30+.

3.4.2 Recruitment and Participation

To recruit participants, I reached out to third-sector organisations such as the East European Resource Centre and the East European Advice Centre via Facebook with the research advert (Appendix 1). Additionally, I posted targeted advertisements on Facebook to reach EE audiences and shared them on my personal Instagram and LinkedIn profiles. I also utilised a snowballing method through peers and friends to further expand the pool of interested individuals.

Those females who were eager to take part in the study, were emailed participant information sheet (Appendix 2), which gave them an overview of the study and were encouraged to email any queries they had. Upon opting to participate, they were given a consent form (Appendix 3) including consent for the interview to be recorded and the information to be used, outlining the brief description of the study including the main goal of the research, the process of data collection and how this information would be stored alongside additional information about interview expectations, required photographs, and interview location details.

Recognising potential challenges in recruiting EE females for BI research in London, I acknowledged the influence of cultural nuances and potential reservations about discussing personal topics such as BI. Considering English as a second language, I was mindful of potential communication barriers. My target was to recruit five to seven participants to ensure data richness and facilitate thorough analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). While Wells (2011) advocates for a minimum of five participants for NA, other authors advise a range of two to ten participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Opting for a minimum of five participants aimed to enable a nuanced exploration of each narrative. Brief participant details are outlined in table 1 provided.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Information for the Five Participants

Name (pseumomised)	**Age**	**Occupation**	**Country of Origin**	**Years in the UK**
Victoria	33	Real Estate	Latvia	10 years
Daria	31	IT	Ukraine	8 years
Alla	31	Marketing	Belarus	12 years
Tamara	34	Modeling	Ukraine	5 years

Karina	38	Real Estate	Latvia	14 years

Apart from information about the study, participants were informed about the need for preparing specific types of photographs as part of the interview. Upon their confirmation to participate, and in addition to other information, they received a confirmation email detailing the interview address and time.

3.5. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, were performed in a therapy room at the clinic, providing a safe and comfortable environment for participants. A short interview schedule was prepared (Appendix 4), aiming to elicit detailed responses while maintaining a conversational tone (Patton, 2014). To encourage participants to share freely about their BI stories, an informal interview style was adopted, aligning with previous researchers suggesting fewer questions tend to yield richer narratives (Morrow, 2005; Patton, 2014; Wells, 2011). Participants were asked to agree to the audio recording of the interview before it took place. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to decline answering specific questions, ensuring respect and autonomy (BPS, 2021).

Visual data collection, facilitated by participant-provided photographs, augmented the narrative, enhancing the comprehension of individual experiences and situating BI constructions within participants' personal contexts (Keats, 2009). Participants were encouraged to select and bring up to five pictures to the interview, if they desired, to aid in discussing their BI narratives (Keats, 2009). During the interview, they were prompted to reflect on the memories associated with these images with the intention of using photographs to evoke memories of early BI-related experiences or significant events, thereby enabling reflection on body perceptions (Reavey & Johnson, 2017). This approach aimed to root their narratives in the fabric of their lives and explore the multifaceted nature of their BI constructions (Reavey & Johnson, 2017). I am going to reflect on this further in the Discussion chapter. Following the interviews, participants were debriefed and given a debriefing form (Appendix 5), along with the opportunity to ask questions and share their thoughts.

3.6 Method of Analysis

Drawing from narrative researchers such as Riessman (2008), Aveiling (2015), and Bakhtin (1986), I adapted their recommendations to fit my epistemology, research objectives, and Yardley's (2002) quality criteria. The DPNA does not follow a linear process due to its informal structure (Chase, 2005) and instead prioritises attentive "close reading" (Andrews et al., 2013). The coding strategy focuses on two primary categories: verbal and non-verbal data. In analysing verbal data, the narrative serves as the main unit of exploration, taking into account various contextual levels, including research-specific aspects and broader socio-cultural and historical factors. After conducting interviews, I transcribed the recordings verbatim to ensure a thorough understanding of the data. This transcription occurs in multiple rounds, starting with a basic capture of words and key features, and is then refined to include non-verbal nuances such as pauses and emphases. This rigorous process demands analytical skills, close attention, and the rebuilding of rapport with participants (Frank, 2012; Riessman, 2008).

In the following stages, the transcribed interviews undergo further analysis through repeated readings to deepen understanding. The initial steps involve thematic and structural analyses, utilising open coding and interpretation to grasp the communicated narrative. This method facilitates the identification of critical elements and the content of the story (the "what") (Appendix 6). While analysing verbal data, I focused on unraveling the language employed by interviewees as they articulated their bodily experiences and emotions, illuminating the interplay of societal norms, self-perception, and personal identity. Operating within a social constructionist framework and acknowledging the language-centric nature of narrative analysis, I highlighted the significance of contextual language. Cultural sensitivity was extended to expressions related to family opinions or societal expectations, illustrating the collective impact on individual body perceptions.

Intersectional feminism further informed this analysis allowing me to examine how multiple aspects of participants' identities such as gender, ethnicity, migration background, and socio-economic positioning interacted to shape the way they talked about and experienced their bodies (Bordo, 2023). Intersectional feminist analysis enabled me to look beyond individual expressions and to consider the broader social structures embedded in participants' narratives. For example, I paid particular attention to how participants

referenced family expectations, cultural values, or social comparisons recognising that these were shaped by both local norms and transnational influences. This approach ensured that the analysis remained sensitive to how social categories and systemic inequalities co-construct bodily experiences, especially in contexts of cultural transition. Furthermore, intersectional feminism informed a reflexive analytic stance, where I remained aware of my own positionality as a researcher and the ways in which my interpretations could influence meaning-making (Aveiling, 2015). This analytic process sought not only to describe participants' narratives but to uncover how intersectional power relations shape bodily discourse, making visible both conformity to and resistance against dominant body ideals.

In analysing non-verbal data, I focused on understanding BI experiences by recognising crucial cues such as facial expressions which reveal participants' emotions, including unspoken feelings of discomfort or confidence. Assessing participants' comfort levels was paramount for building rapport and ensuring ethical research practices (Morrow, 2005). I examined story pacing, non-verbal cues, and the structure of the retelling (the "how") (Appendix 7). Acknowledging the potential limitations of their English in fully encapsulating their experiences, I encouraged participants to use their native language or figurative expressions to elaborate on the "how" in areas where English might fall short (Appendix 8). This approach aimed to capture the depth and richness of their experiences and understand the interplay between language, culture, and BI perceptions (Pavlenko, 2008).

Additionally, using photographs served as an alternative method for examining their impact on memory, reflection, and the recall of specific BI experiences. Photos provided insights into participants' environments and influences while potentially evoking subconscious reactions and revealing unexpressed emotions or insights (Robinson, 2002). Evaluating whether the photos empowered or disempowered participants enhanced the authenticity and depth of the collected data (Appendix 9). Furthermore, analysing voice added richness to the qualitative data by unpacking emotional nuances that may not be fully expressed in written transcripts. Variations in inflection, tone, and pauses revealed emotional aspects of participants' BI experiences, thus contributing to the research's authenticity (Savage, 2000).

DPNA approach also facilitates an exploration of the "why" behind BI stories, addressing their underlying purposes of each narrative (Riessman, 2008). Furthermore, next

step the analysis focused on the positioning of participants, particularly the various roles assumed by women (Appendix 10). Transitioning to the dialogic aspect, I investigated how different narratives intersect while paying attention to participants' abilities to position themselves within their lived experiences, navigating roles, perspectives, and identities (Wells, 2011). Aveling et al.'s (2015) guide on ‘positioning’ assisted in navigating diverse 'i-positions' and the manifold voices present in each narrative. This analysis considered both the tellers and listeners and their personal, social, cultural, and political contexts. It further involved identifying contradictions, cultural dichotomies, and conflicting ideas within the discourses, revealing how women were positioned in contradictory ways by societal standards of self-improvement and self-acceptance.

Next, I moved to the analysis of multiple voices within the narrative (Appendix 11). Drawing from Holstein and Gubrium’s (2020) concept of “bracketing,” I recognised the multiplicity of voices within individual narratives and explored any contradictions present to uncover their multi-voiced nature. To enrich this analysis, I employed Frank's (2012) questioning method within DPNA to investigate the stakes for various parties involved in the story, assessing how both the narrative and its presentation influence perceptions of BI stories. Finally, guided by methodologies proposed by Aveling et al. (2015) and Frank (2002), I sought to uncover unique facets of individual stories while acknowledging the interconnected nature of narratives and the multitude of voices shaping them.

The overall interpretation aimed to reveal the narrative's significance, relying on a creative process that aligns with the research question, theoretical framework, and the goal of enhancing validity while maintaining flexibility. Following this process, the stories were “restoried” in a historical sequence (chronology) (Frank, 2012). From the analysis, themes related to BI emerge for each individual, which will be discussed in the Chapter Four: Analysis. Rearranging stories chronologically in the analysis chapter and identifying individual themes embedded in interviewee narratives highlighted common ideas and challenges, reflecting Frank’s (2002) assertion on elaborating narrative types to recognise uniqueness while acknowledging external influences. In analysing the emerged themes, it was crucial to acknowledge my influence on the data as the researcher. Practicing reflexivity by revisiting interviews, reflecting on responses, and documenting insights in a reflexive journal enhanced the integrity of the research.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

3.7.1 Ethics Approval

Given the exploration of potentially delicate subjects in this study, I faced the challenge of carefully considering the ethical significance and advantages of the project for EE women in the UK (BPS, 2021; Sanjari et al., 2014). Ethical clearance was obtained before data collection and approved by the 'Research Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology at the University of East London (UEL)' (Appendix 12). I strictly followed ethical research guidelines outlined in the BPS 'Code of Human Research Ethics' (BPS, 2021), 'HCPC guidance on conduct for students' (HCPC, 2016), and UEL 'Code of Practice for Research Ethics' (UEL, 2015). Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) emphasise the moral responsibility of researchers, requiring sensitivity to ethical issues, knowledge, honesty, and fairness. I maintained a commitment to these principles throughout the research process, demonstrating respect for participants and their narratives (Gair, 2012). In addition to ethical clearance, a data management plan was formulated to ensure the secure handling of data (BPS, 2021) (Appendix 13). I adhered to the 'Data Protection Regulation: Guidance for Researchers' and UEL 'Code of Practice for Research Ethics' (UEL, 2015).

3.7.2 Ethical and Practical Considerations

Ensuring research validity relies on transparent methods and the confidence readers have in knowledge claims, guiding future studies. To enhance validity in this BI research, I employed Yardley's (2000) dimensions and considered critiques of NA, crafting a flexible coding strategy. Embracing a social constructionism viewpoint, these principles allowed for flexible interpretation rather than rigid rules. *Sensitivity to Context* involved immersing in prior research, literature, and cultural context, particularly focusing on language, social interaction, and culture in BI experiences within EE and Western European contexts. *Commitment and Rigour* demanded substantial time investment, and a coding strategy aimed at robust interpretation. *Transparency and Coherence* were achieved through clear data analysis explanations, ensuring a transparent argument and reflecting on underlying beliefs. While predefined coding rules could limit nuanced interpretation, meaningful criteria were essential, balancing flexibility and openness for researchers and health professionals. Given

that DPNA lacks specific guidance, I further exemplify transparency by providing clear examples of the different steps taken in the analysis, each of which is illustrated in the appendices.

Ethical considerations, particularly regarding power dynamics, were an instrumental component in the research process. Acknowledging the authority to portray participants in various ways, I recognised the responsibility to ensure a balanced and fair representation while respecting participants and aligning with academic requirements. This became especially pertinent when amplifying the voices of under-researched or underrepresented groups to avoid misrepresenting their narratives. Maintaining transparency and reflexivity fostered a trustworthy relationship with participants, encouraging autonomy and addressing power imbalances by promoting collaboration.

Ensuring my safety as the researcher was paramount, given the potential emotional impact of the narratives. To safeguard my well-being, I consistently accessed personal therapy and sought appropriate supervision. Consulting ethical guidelines and recognising the evolving nature of risk, I took proactive measures to protect participants, including ensuring informed consent and addressing concerns related to potential disclosure of information.

Continued reflection on the distinction between public and private spaces prompted me to consider the potential intrusiveness of interviews about BI, particularly since participants were away from their homes and comfort zones in the clinic. Given the sensitivity of the subject, I chose to only audio record the interviews, avoiding video recordings to enhance privacy and autonomy for the participants. This decision facilitated a more comfortable environment, accommodating individual needs while rebalancing power dynamics. These measures aimed to uphold ethical standards in conducting sensitive research on BI experiences.

3.8 Methodological Reflexivity

In the complexities of my research methodology, reflexivity emerged as a vital aspect of the process, particularly during the interviews. I encountered difficulties when participants seemed hesitant to fully express their BI experiences, influenced by the sensitivity of the subject matter and potential cultural stigma. To overcome these challenges, I employed active listening skills and created a welcoming atmosphere that encouraged openness. By using

open-ended questions and allowing for moments of silence, I provided participants with the space needed to reflect and share their narratives at their own pace.

Reflecting on my own background as an EE woman with past BI issues now residing in the UK, I considered how my language choices and cultural background influenced the research process. I recognised my positionality, that facilitated a closer connection with participants and established trust. This connection not only impacted the nature of the conversations but also shaped the narratives that emerged. Acknowledging my background and biases throughout the analysis process, I remained transparent about the ways my experiences coloured my interpretations. Examining power relations involved understanding how power shaped research practice on multiple levels. Drawing on Foucault's perspective that power is multiple, mobile, and inherent in language (Polkinghorne, 2007), I examined how narratives were influenced by historical, social, cultural, political, and economic discourses, considering the dominance or marginalisation of certain narratives. My role as a researcher necessitated reflection on how power operated between myself and the participants, the data, and the interpretations. This iterative process of reflection and adjustment deepened the integrity of the research, guiding my understanding of how BI narratives are co-constructed within a cultural context.

Within the broader context of reflexivity, I encountered deeply personal moments during interviews where participants' stories resonated with my own experiences, particularly those that invoked memories of my childhood and family. As I listened to participants share their own struggles with BI, some narratives stirred personal recollections that heightened my awareness of how closely BI issues are intertwined with family dynamics and cultural upbringing. For example, I found that certain phrases and cultural expectations I had internalised while growing up were also echoed by participants such as remarks about portion sizes, making a splash in the pool if one ate too much, or developing "muffin tops" as a result of excessive eating. These cultural sayings, such as the emphasis on being "slim to be beautiful" or the frequent comments on maintaining a feminine appearance, triggered my memories of similar expectations within my own family, reinforcing the notion that BI is often a communal rather than solely individual concern. In particular, one story stood out when a participant recalled how, from a very young age, her grandmother placed strong emphasis on her appearance, stating that she must look feminine to be valued. The participant

shared that this expectation was introduced when she was only five years old, profoundly shaping her early understanding of beauty and femininity. Listening to this story was deeply uncomfortable for me as it mirrored certain pressures I had experienced growing up in a similar cultural context, wanting to always wear dresses to look like my mother and to use lipstick even being a child, yet it felt more intense due to the participant's tender age at the time of the incident. Moreover, participants shared experience of the transition from childhood to more feminine look reminded me of my own struggles being at the beach with peers and noticing how some of my friends have already developed curvy bodies while I felt more as a child in my own body with the mind of a young girl made me occasionally feeling ashamed.

These narratives, while resonating with my own experiences, also left me with a sense of sorrow, as it highlighted the deep emotional consequences of such early impositions. The discomfort I felt during this particular interview moment stemmed from the recognition that these early familial expectations often shape and limit the body's freedom, imprinting lasting psychological effects on self-worth and identity. While some participants' stories felt familiar and connected with my own experiences, others, such as this one, left me feeling deeply saddened. It was a reminder of how pervasive societal and familial influences can be, especially when they begin so early in life, shaping one's relationship with the body in ways that might not be immediately evident but have long-lasting effects. As a researcher, this moment reinforced the importance of reflexivity in understanding how my personal experiences and emotions might intersect with those of the participants, potentially influencing the course of the interview and the interpretation of their stories.

These moments of personal resonance highlighted the co-constructed nature of BI narratives. They underscored the idea that individual BI issues are not only shaped by personal experience but are also deeply intertwined with shared cultural norms and familial expectations. By acknowledging and reflecting on these connections, I was able to deepen my understanding of how BI is shaped both individually and collectively, contributing to a more nuanced analysis of the data. Moreover, the recognition of how personal memories were triggered during interviews allowed me to refine my approach, ensuring that I remained mindful of the ways my own emotional responses could influence the research process, and

helped me maintain a critical distance in order to analyse the data with the necessary objectivity.

3.9. Chapter Summary

Here, I outlined the theoretical underpinnings of this research, alongside the rationales behind my methodological choice of DPNA. I then discussed the research design and how I implemented analysis procedures outlining both verbal and non-verbal data analysis. I also deliberated ethical considerations, alongside the credibility of this research. Next, I present the analysis and outcomes gained from participants in Chapter Four: Analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse the narratives of five participants, presenting each story individually in the sequence that the interviews took place. I focus on how each participant's BI story is constructed, highlighting the diverse voices that have contributed to defining and re-defining their BI stories. I address the unique way each participant's BI was developed and evolved with the focus of my research inquiry:

1. BI can take on diverse narrative forms, shaped by interpersonal circumstances, making it both multifaceted and continuous.

2. The narratives surrounding BI may undergo transformation and revelation of intricate perspectives as women relocate to different countries.

3. Women who have relocated to a different country might express conflicting and paradoxical ideas and emotions concerning their BI.

For each participant, I included a table of themes that illuminate key aspects and conflicts within their BI stories. I have also incorporated extracts from the transcripts to showcase the narratives' content (topics discussed), performance (BI construction and expression), positioning (self-placement within their narratives), and multi-voicedness (the various voices within an individual’s narrative). This approach aims to present the results clearly and understandably for the reader. Identifiable information has been pseudonymised

or omitted in accordance with guidelines (BPS, 2018; HCPC, 2016), and participant details are kept brief to ensure confidentiality, serving merely as contextual information.

4.2 'Victoria':

Victoria is a young woman from Latvia who moved to London ten years ago to pursue her master's degree and now works in IT. Her story reflected the voice of a patriarchal society with strict beauty standards, embracing a glamorous, traditionally feminine look and undergoing significant body changes, including plastic surgery. Although she underwent personal growth and established a more balanced relationship with herself after moving to the UK, her adherence to traditional ideals of feminine beauty remained unchanged, as she considered them her default beliefs. This revealed an illusion of freedom, concealed by deep-rooted societal influences.

List of Victoria's Themes

1. Victoria's Femininity: Illusion of Choice or Inherited Eastern European Beauty Ideals
2. "It Was My Best Weight": The Illusion of Health, Beauty and its Societal Validation
3. London's Paradox: The Freedom of Independence Versus The Pressure of Internalised Eastern European Beauty Standards
4. The Illusion of Autonomy: Victoria's Embrace of Normalised Surgery
5. Self-Acceptance or Strict Discipline? Unpacking Victoria's Path to Body Empowerment

4.2.1 Victoria's Femininity: Illusion of Choice or Inherited Eastern European Beauty Ideals

The silhouette of the perfect woman was etched in Victoria's mind, representing a delicate balance of beauty, health, and fitness, all seen as defining a *"real woman."* This idealised image encompassed flowing long hair, meticulously maintained nails, skilfully applied makeup, a slender and toned physique, and sophisticated attire. These ingrained ideals greatly impacted Victoria's sense of worth and BI, serving as the standards for her self-evaluation.

Victoria's journey with BI began in childhood, rooted in her struggle with her curly hair, which she inherited from her father. In contrast to her mother's beautiful, wavy locks, maintaining her curls proved difficult, leading her parents to keep her hair short—a choice

that frequently resulted in her being mistaken for a boy. This misidentification ended at age 10 when Victoria insisted on growing her hair long to align with the traditional feminine ideals she noticed around her. This decision marked the beginning of her self-discovery as she navigated her identity amid rigid beauty standards, reflecting the societal expectations of femininity that she had internalised from an early age in Latvian culture.

The feminine and slim BI was a concept that was wholeheartedly embraced first of all by her family. Particularly, her mother's voice played a significant role in instilling these ideals within Victoria, emphasising the essentiality of looking after one's appearance and maintaining a slender physique. Victoria vividly recalled moments where her mother expressed concern about the possibility of her veering towards more modern trends, such as Emo or dreadlocks hairstyles, which were popular among her peers at the time. Victoria shared an anecdote from her past, mentioning her lack of interest in such trends and her appreciation for a glamorous aesthetic, much to her mother's relief.

Extract 1:

> *"I was never interested in anything like this. And my mum was very happy, so I always liked this glamorous woman look. So, for me, I had no issues with this and my mum, she was always scared because one of my best friends, she came home once with, I don't know how to say it…. dreadlocks hairstyle. And my mum said, I hope you will never come to me and say that you want this"*
>
> (V6 lines 12-19).

This provides insight into the powerful familial and societal influences shaping Victoria's views on physical beauty. Despite her peers' experimentation with various styles and identities, Victoria remained committed to her own vision of beauty, a vision she believed was uniquely hers. However, as a researcher, one might interpret this alignment with her mother's preferences and anxieties as indicative of deeper influences. This narrative further underscored a traditional gendered conception of beauty, echoing Victoria's earlier assertion (V5 lines 8-10): *"Women should look like women; men should look like men."* This statement highlighted the ingrained gender norms that continued to frame her perceptions of male and female beauty ideals.

4.2.2 "It Was My Best Weight": The Illusion of Health, Beauty and its Societal Validation

At just 14, Victoria's desire for an ideal slim body drove her to extreme measures, including a rigorous routine of two hours of daily exercise and severe food restriction. Over one summer, she lost 20 kilos, transforming into a figure that aligned with cultural beauty standards of slimness and slenderness. However, this drastic change came at a cost; her weight plummeted to a dangerously low level, alarming her mother, and prompting doctors to warn her about serious health risks. Despite these concerns, her new appearance earned admiration from peers, reinforcing the notion that slimness equals beauty. The influence of society and her peers shaped her perception of her body, and her statement, *"It was my best weight"* (V 10 line 22), seemed contradictory to her parents' and doctors' warnings. Although she claimed not to be particularly enthusiastic about dieting, she appeared to overlook the significant consequences of her weight loss that summer. Yet, she hinted at potential health risks, mentioning:

Extract 2:

> *"I was at the age of 14 or 15… I was going through this; I had this, let's say not a disorder, but I had this trend that, okay, I should stop eating and lose weight".*
>
> (V 16 lines 2-5).

Victoria's choice of words indicated a reluctance to label her behaviours as a disorder. This suggested that she may recognise some elements of disordered eating but preferred to frame it as a fashionable behaviour *"trend"* during that time. This could be indicative of the normalisation of unhealthy weight loss practices among youth in her environment. The use of the word *"should"* indicate perceived pressure, whether self-imposed or externally driven, to conform to a particular body ideal underscoring the tension between personal health and societal standards of appearance.

The pursuit of an ideal body did not stop at weight loss for Victoria. In a country where pale skin was the norm, she sought a tanned complexion, another aspect of the glamorous image she aspired to. This led her to frequent tanning salons and use fake tan products, which often resulted in an unnatural orange hue, particularly noticeable in her eyebrows. Looking back at photos from that time, she saw a girl with strange hair, a slim figure, and an orange tint—far from the glamorous ideal she envisioned. Throughout these trials, her BI remained centred on achieving a blonde, tall, slim, and glamorous look. These beauty standards became second nature to Victoria, who consistently argued that they were

motivated by her *"default settings"* (V 11 lines 4-5) and that she never felt coerced. This belief in acting solely from personal preference may have overlooked the impact of societal and familial influences ingrained from an early age and shaping her aspirations. Her assertion of not feeling coerced might reflect a deeper internalisation of these societal norms, blurring the line between external pressures and personal choice and leading her to perceive them as her *"nature."*

4.2.3 London's Paradox: The Freedom of Independence Versus The Pressure of Internalised Eastern European Beauty Standards

Victoria's relocation to London marked a breaking point in her relationship with her BI. Life away from home offered freedom but lacked the discipline she experienced in Latvia. This newfound independence made weight and appearance management more challenging, creating a wider gap between her real and ideal BI. In Latvia, homemade meals and regular sports participation helped her manage her weight effectively. However, her lifestyle in London, characterised by increased socialising and lack of self-care, led her to a breaking point. Her increased alcohol consumption disrupted her eating habits triggering cravings that resulted in cycles of overeating followed by strict dieting, causing her weight to fluctuate by 20-30 kilos. This made Victoria realise that she had strayed from her preferred self-image and ideals, leading to self-disappointment, simultaneously reflecting her mother's criticisms and unrealistic EE beauty standards.

This realisation underscored the complex interplay between newfound freedom and internalised body standards expectations, highlighting the challenges of maintaining personal ideals in a dynamic and socially demanding environment. Upon realising the need for better self-care after significant weight gain, Victoria resolved, *"it's time to get back."* This awareness empowered her to reduce alcohol consumption, enabling her to manage cravings more effectively by indulging occasionally while maintaining control. During the interview, Victoria shared a photo from her highest weight, a moment of silence, self-reflection that exposed her lack of confidence and the potential embarrassment she experienced at the time. Victoria frequently recalled her mother's comments about her size, such as, *"Oh my God again, you put on weight; why can't you eat just a little bit?"* (V24 lines 2-3). These remarks heightened her stress and mirrored her own critical thoughts about her weight. Nevertheless,

Victoria asserted that societal and familial opinions did not influence her (V12 lines 1-3), repeatedly stating that her preferences were *"by default"* and *"unaffected"* by external judgments. Instead, she maintained that her focus was on personal comfort and attractiveness to men.

Extract 3:

> *"It's me, my comfort. And I think it's as well male attraction. OK, because when you look… when I look better, I attract better men."*
>
> (V 25 lines 1-4).

Victoria asserted her independence from societal opinions, yet her focus on attracting men suggested a different narrative. This emphasis revealed the pervasive influence of patriarchal ideals, where gender norms and expectations of attractiveness contradicted her claim of autonomy. She acknowledged that enhancing her appearance drew more male interest, indicating that her self-perception was affected by the attention she received, leading her to associate her weight with the caliber of men she attracted. This dichotomy underscored the tension between Victoria's pursuit of autonomy and the societal standards that influenced her behaviour and self-image, highlighting how external pressures and ideals within a patriarchal framework shape self-worth.

4.2.4 The Illusion of Autonomy: Victoria's Embrace of Normalised Surgery

Victoria revealed her long-standing struggle with weight issues, expressing dissatisfaction with her body due to fluctuations that often made her feel like *"a different person."* This insight highlighted the immense pressure she experienced to conform to the rigid EE ideals of feminine beauty, which often emphasise being slender, youthful, and polished. These standards dictated a particular aesthetic that Victoria found challenging to maintain, exacerbating her body dissatisfaction. Accepting her imperfections would contradict her internalised expectations of these beauty standards, creating an internal conflict that she found too overwhelming to manage.

She noted that weight loss adversely affected her skin elasticity. While intensive training helped prevent loose skin, her breasts did not regain their firmness, leading to unhappiness with their appearance and limitations in clothing choices, including bikinis. This contributed to her self-consciousness, in particular when naked, linked to male attraction

again revealing how patriarchal voice would impact her sense of confidence and self-worth. Her discontent with her body drove her to seek a sense of wholeness and self-acceptance through surgery procedures. During a consultation with a doctor, Victoria also expressed dissatisfaction with her legs, prompting her to undergo multiple surgeries simultaneously. The tension between self-acceptance and the desire for change illustrated a nuanced picture of Victoria's journey toward cosmetic surgery. She expressed this sentiment:

Extract 4:

> *"I felt that it can be better. It was not about being uncomfortable. It felt more like, okay, I can have it better. I can have it beautiful. Why not do it?"*
>
> (V34 lines 1-4).

Victoria's decision to undergo cosmetic surgery demonstrated her readiness to embrace transformation, seeing it as a straightforward solution to her dissatisfaction. This highlighted the normalisation of surgical enhancements as a standard path to self-improvement in both Western and Eastern Europe. Although she framed her choice as a means of boosting confidence rather than conceding to societal beauty standards, her quick acceptance of surgery revealed a deep internalisation of these standards. This underscored how modern beauty culture in both regions often promoted surgery as an easy fix for personal insecurities, reflecting a societal trend where the pursuit of self-acceptance frequently led individuals to alter their bodies to fit idealised notions of beauty. Victoria's choice, though seemingly effortless, embodied a complex struggle with identity, confidence, and the relentless pursuit of an idealised self.

In sharing her pictures, Victoria presented her newly transformed self post-surgery, reflecting a visibly reduced body size and a radiant smile that exuded confidence and positivity, indicating a more assured demeanour and contentment with her altered physique. By sharing these images, it is likely she expressed enthusiasm and a willingness to convey positive moments from her life. The act of sharing multiple pictures suggested a desire to showcase instances where she felt positive about herself, using these visual representations as a means of self-expression and empowerment on social media.

4.2.5 Self-Acceptance or Strict Discipline? Unpacking Victoria's Path to Body Empowerment

In the conclusion of the interview, Victoria considered the factors that led her to embrace comfort with her BI more recently. She emphasised the importance of experience, explaining that through trial and error, she discerned what practices worked best for her and were most beneficial to her well-being. Additionally, she highlighted the significance of prioritising self-acceptance over seeking validation from others (V 40 lines 3-4): *"You don't need to impress anyone; you need to choose yourself first."* This indicated a shift toward self-empowerment and authenticity in her BI journey. Victoria recognised that BI is complex and requires a holistic approach:

Extract 5:

> *"...It's a complex. It's not only the look; it's about overall well-being. When I was 14, it was about being thin, but now it's more about being fit and comfortable in your body, whatever size it is."*
>
> (V 39 lines 8-14).

Victoria observed that age played an important role in her evolving perspective, fostering a growing sense of self-assurance and reducing her concern for external judgments. She also acknowledged the impact of self-care practices, such as massage and exercise, in promoting mental well-being and relaxation. Victoria shared insights into her exercise routine, highlighting self-discovery and adaptation. Her approach to exercise focused on both physical outcomes and personal growth, with an understanding of her body's needs. She emphasised the importance of balance in maintaining a healthy relationship with her body, indicating her holistic focus on overall well-being. Victoria recognised that balance and moderation were key, reflecting her development in BI.

While Victoria advocated for balance and self-acceptance, discerning whether her approach genuinely embraced these ideas or was a disciplined pursuit of her ideal BI remained challenging. Her journey through beauty ideals was marked by a fervent emphasis on feminine beauty, often overshadowed by the struggle to reconcile healthy practices with true self-acceptance. After relocating to London, she adopted positive lifestyle changes, such as improved sleep, reduced alcohol and sugar intake, healthier food choices, effective stress management, and various beauty treatments. Although this approach underscored her commitment to physical health, it raised essential questions about whether her dedication stemmed from a desire for genuine self-care or an obsessive need to control her appearance.

Overall, this represented a complex interplay between societal expectations and her quest for authentic self-acceptance as she navigated the delicate balance between looking good and truly feeling good in her own skin.

4.3 'Daria':

Daria is a Ukrainian woman in the IT field who relocated to London eight years ago for work. Her journey reflected an evolving relationship with her body, marked by introspection on puberty, social comparisons, emotional and spiritual growth, and a strong resistance to societal pressures. Through her narratives, Daria provided important perspectives on the ongoing interaction among BI identity, personal growth, and self-acceptance.

List of Daria's Themes

1. At the Family Table: The Clash of Hearty Eating Traditions and Slimming Societal Norms
2. From Adolescent Insecurity About Slimness and Curviness in Ukraine to Embracing Personal Authenticity
3. Evolving Femininity: Daria's London Transformation from Physical Traits and Success to Intrinsic Energy
4. From Conformity to Confidence: Escaping Patriarchal Beauty Norms in London
5. From Patriarchy to Personal Agency: Daria's Evolution of Body Image

4.3.1 At the Family Table: The Clash of Hearty Eating Traditions and Slimming Societal Norms

Daria's story of BI began at the family table, where meals provided more than just nourishment; they became a stage for intergenerational exchanges conveying implicit and explicit messages about BI. Her family significantly shaped her relationship with food and BI, with her mother focusing on health and portion control, while her grandmother adhered to a traditional outlook on eating well and feeling full, a perspective echoing the post-World War II influence of famine. These generational differences and varying attitudes toward BI emerged during family gatherings, where meals provided a unique lens through which to explore broader societal dialogues about health, body aesthetics, and the intersection of

cultural norms and gender expectations. For example, Daria recalled one moment to illustrate this dynamic.

Extract 1:

> *"They would always, for example, give me a big plate of food. And it wouldn't be a problem, but they would always eat less and always make some jokes… Like, you know, if I eat more of this, I would not be able to go through the doorstep kind of thing haha… And I think sometimes, grandma would make some jokes too. You know, if you jump through the pool like, you know, you will make a big splash haha"*
>
> (D 4 lines 6-14).

Daria's narrative revealed a family dynamic that celebrated cultural values of abundance through meals, yet highlighted a contradiction: women were expected to exercise portion control, adhering to norms that deemed a hearty appetite unfeminine. These seemingly humorous comments reinforced gender norms, dictating that women maintain restraint in eating behaviours. This environment reflected the broader societal tension between the cultural celebration of food and restrictive patriarchal beauty standards, fostering anxiety about dietary habits and self-perception. The atmosphere created a stark dichotomy: men were encouraged to eat heartily and celebrated for their strength, while women faced cautionary remarks about moderation and balancing health with traditional femininity. For instance, Daria observed her cousin being praised for piling his plate high, whereas similar behaviour from her prompted playful critiques about maintaining her figure. These implicit messages reinforced the notion that moderation and propriety were essential to the feminine ideal, reflecting societal norms that prioritised male physicality over female needs.

Women were expected to be slim, have large breasts, and maintain a flat stomach, criteria that weighed heavily on Daria and compelled her to conform to these beauty ideals. While engaging in introspection about beauty and body trends, she frequently cited terms like *"big breasts," "slim,"* and *"pressure,"* underscoring their significance in her experience. This repetition highlighted the pervasive impact of sexualised societal expectations on her self-image, revealing how deeply ingrained these ideals were in her understanding of femininity and beauty. Daria recognised the nuanced cultural balancing act in Ukraine, where women were celebrated for their curves yet expected to eat smaller portions. This duality created a complex pressure, encouraging indulgence while enforcing restrictive gender roles

illustrating the conflicting pressures that informed her understanding of femininity and self-worth.

4.3.2 From Adolescent Insecurity About Slimness and Curviness in Ukraine to Embracing Personal Authenticity

From a young age, Daria engaged in various physical activities that fostered a sense of bodily freedom. However, adolescence introduced increased scrutiny of her BI and societal expectations of femininity, shifting her self-perception as she began to consider how others, especially boys, viewed her. This developing awareness was driven by social norms that emphasised physical attractiveness, instilling in her the belief that her value as a woman hinged on her appearance, particularly in the eyes of men. Beach outings, school dances, and social gatherings heightened her insecurities, marking the onset of her acute awareness of the masculine gaze on her femininity during her transition into adolescence.

Daria's concerns about body shape intensified as she observed her peers developing curves, highlighting the influence of her friends on her self-perception. Around the age of 14, she became more attuned to societal cues that valued a specific female body shape while noticing her own developing feminine curves. Through her interactions with peers, Daria became aware of the prevailing belief that larger breasts indicated greater femininity, which only fuelled her insecurities further. She acknowledged her long-standing concern about breast size, recognising that her desire for larger breasts and a leaner frame stemmed not from personal preference but from a perceived need to conform to beauty ideals prevalent in Ukraine. Although Daria stated that her perception of breast importance was driven by traditional Ukrainian feminine standards, this belief significantly impacted her self-image. This awareness signalled a profound internalisation of cultural norms surrounding BI and beauty standards that prioritised slimness and specific physical traits associated with femininity. By 16, dating further amplified her awareness of these ideals. Daria perceived herself as (D 9 lines 1-4) *"fitting a model stereotype"* due to her slimness and reasonable height but believed that larger breasts would enhance her femininity. This reflection indicated how deeply ingrained cultural norms shaped her view of beauty, as she navigated a landscape where physical appearance was closely tied to societal acceptance and self-worth.

In her 20s, as Daria observed her friends opting for cosmetic procedures, the pressure of societal expectations surrounding beauty became increasingly apparent. This narrative reflected the normalisation of enhancements among Daria's peers, making such choices seem readily accessible and desirable. While she considered cosmetic surgery as a potential option, Daria wrestled with the challenge of finding value and self-worth beyond superficial appearances. Despite external pressures, Daria maintained a strong sense of personal agency and confidence, grappling with the tension between conforming to societal beauty ideals and embracing her inherent worth. Her declaration (D 18 line 32), *"I feel like I'm already good enough,"* emerged as a powerful act of self-acceptance amidst mounting societal pressures. Reflecting on these years and her transition from adolescence to womanhood, Daria recognised her struggles as emblematic of broader societal discourses that equate women's value with their physical appearance from an early age. Her introspective tone conveyed vulnerability and self-awareness; expressions like *"a bit insecure"* and *"it would look more feminine"* highlighted how societal perceptions weighed heavily on her self-image.

Throughout her journey, Daria navigated the complexities of self-identity amid societal expectations, finding comfort in her authenticity. This realisation marked a significant achievement, as she developed a nuanced self-perception that transcended rigid beauty norms in Ukraine. Her narrative illustrated an ongoing internal dialogue about self-worth and confidence, revealing her awareness of patriarchal ideals dictating beauty standards and her determination to define her identity on her own terms.

4.3.3 Evolving Femininity: Daria's Shift from Emphasis on Physical Traits and Success to Embracing Intrinsic Energy in London

Daria's understanding of femininity was initially defined by the physical traits that distinguished women from men, such as softness, slenderness, and curviness. She viewed femininity as a way to differentiate herself from masculinity, influenced by societal norms, cultural expectations, and gender stereotypes linking femininity to specific attributes and traditional roles. However, as Daria matured and moved to London, her perception underwent a profound evolution. Reading about self-care and self-love deepened her insights, leading her to see femininity as an *"intrinsic energy"* rather than mere physical traits. This shift underscored the significance of self-love and self-care as crucial for feeling comfortable and

beautiful in her own skin. Her journey embraced skincare routines, healthy eating, and regular exercise, all driven by a focus on overall well-being instead of conventional beauty standards. In London, she found liberation in understanding that beauty transcends appearance and encompasses the essence of who you are, grounding her self-worth in her inner qualities.

Extract 2:

> *"I do feel like being feminine is more about the energy you give off and how you feel about yourself, and also how you behave in certain situations rather than looking a certain way."*
>
> (D 13 lines 2-6).

Daria's relocation to London marked a significant period of self-exploration, prompting her to reevaluate her understanding of gender roles. Her life in Ukraine was dominated by a focus on career efficiency and analytical thinking, which reflected traditional masculine values. This emphasis on masculine attributes while living in Eastern Europe stemmed from Western cultural norms that prioritised professional success and resilience, compelling women to adopt these traits to navigate a competitive and patriarchal society. However, this focus on masculine ideals may also reveal a deep-seated resentment toward traditional female roles in Ukraine, where women are often pressured to abandon their careers in favour of family and domestic responsibilities. In contrast, Daria's current embrace of emotions and bodily awareness aligns more closely with EE societal expectations of gender roles, representing her newfound sense of balance. Her previous career-driven focus had often sidelined her emotional and physical health—a trade-off she now recognises is not sustainable.

Daria's introspective journey highlights her growing recognition of the crucial balance between productivity and emotional well-being. By exploring feminine energy, she connected emotions with bodily sensations and embraced activities like aerial yoga, freestyle dancing, and archery, all of which mirrored her quest for harmony between intellect and physicality. This integration of spiritual and physical pursuits emphasised her commitment to personal development rooted in feminine intuition. Catalysed by her move to London, this transformation marked a bold departure from the rigid patriarchal constraints of success and

traditional beauty ideals of her Ukrainian upbringing, empowering her to redefine her identity on her own terms.

4.3.4 Daria's Transition from Ukraine's Patriarchal Beauty Pressures to the UK's Culture of Acceptance

Daria's narrative provided a comparative analysis of societal pressures on BI in Ukraine versus the UK, unveiling distinct cultural norms and their influence. In Ukraine, societal expectations regarding BI were stringent, with external comments on appearance being common and often leading to hurtful judgments. Within this cultural framework, femininity and attractiveness were equated with curves and sliminess, setting a high beauty standard that compelled women to conform to specific physical traits. Such pressures frequently generated feelings of inadequacy and contemplation of cosmetic surgery as a plausible option.

Conversely, Daria's experiences in the UK were marked by more respectful and less judgmental attitudes toward BI, which offered her relief and empowerment. This cultural contrast underscored the varying degrees of societal pressure and their impact on individual self-esteem and BI. The UK's more accepting environment provided Daria a reprieve from the stringent beauty standards prevalent in Ukraine, enabling her to appreciate her value beyond physical appearance.

Extract 3:

> *"So in Ukraine, because you would have this pressure around the whole community. But then also guys would have a certain expectation of you, so if you wouldn't look a certain way, they would make comments which could be pretty hurtful versus here in the UK, none of the guys would be saying those kinds of things... they know it's inappropriate…"*
>
> (D 15 lines 4-12).

Daria's narrative underscored the significant role of cultural context in shaping perceptions of beauty and self-worth. While in Ukraine women face pressure and male expectations were omnipresent, with women often subjected to hurtful comments if they did not meet certain beauty standards. This reflects a deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset that can undermine self-esteem and reinforce oppressive beauty ideals. However, in London,

Daria found that such comments from men were absent, revealing a cultural shift where there is a greater awareness of the inappropriateness of judging women's appearances. This difference underscored the impact of moving to a society where respect for individual differences and personal boundaries was more pronounced. This environment provided Daria with a sense of liberation, allowing her to redefine her identity free from the critical gaze of her previous surroundings, highlighting the positive influence of relocating to a more progressive cultural context on women's self-perception and BI.

4.3.5 From Patriarchy to Personal Agency: Daria's Evolution of Body Image

Daria's narrative revealed a profound journey toward redefining BI and beauty through personal agency and holistic self-care. Her relocation to the UK marked a critical turning point, transforming her relationship with her body and self-perception. She shifted from feeling constrained by patriarchal ideals that emphasised unrealistic feminine traits, specifically large breasts and a slim waist, and the pressure to compete with men's success, to embracing greater freedom in her self-expression and a more authentic, intrinsic sense of femininity. The greater societal acceptance of diverse body types and varied definitions of beauty that she encountered allowed her to explore diverse physical activities as avenues for self-expression and emotional release rather than mere tools for aesthetic conformity. This empowerment enabled Daria to anchor her self-worth in internal values rather than the fluctuating judgments of others. This evolution underscored the argument that, for Daria, true beauty transcended mere appearance. With age and relocation, her understanding of beauty became rooted in a holistic approach that integrated physical health, mental clarity, emotional depth, and spiritual growth. This perspective stood in sharp contrast to the EE societal emphasis on superficial standards, heavily influenced by a patriarchal framework that dictated narrow definitions of femininity and placed immense pressure on women to conform to idealised beauty norms.

In sharing her pictures during the interview, Daria showcased her consistently positive outlook on her appearance over time, underscoring the continuity of her self-perception despite the challenging societal views on attractiveness. This notion of preserving identity in a world obsessed with fluctuating beauty trends revealed the importance of self-acceptance

amid external judgments. Daria's narrative served as a testament to the idea that beauty is not static but rather an evolving expression anchored in the self.

Overall, Daria's journey challenged prevailing norms that equate beauty with a narrow set of physical traits and instead promoted a more inclusive, multifaceted approach encouraging her readers to move towards holistic self-acceptance, valuing inner beauty over societal standards.

4.4'Alla':

Alla, a Belarusian woman who moved to London to pursue a master's degree, has lived in the city for over a decade since she was 20 years old. She positioned herself as someone deeply affected by the theme of BI, expressing a keen awareness of the disparity between her internal feelings about her body and how she presented herself in social environments. Her story reflected the influence of patriarchy and intergenerational pressures, highlighting the struggle to reconcile familial affection with prescribed body ideals, as well as the shame and silence she experienced while navigating a society that prioritised appearance.

List of Alla's Themes

1. Under the Patriarchal Lens: Alla's Confusion in a Beauty-Obsessed Society"
2. Intergenerational Patriarchal Messages: Reconciling Family Affection with Prescribed Body Ideals
3. Navigating Shame and Silence: Alla's Struggle with Body Image in a Patriarchal Society
4. Alla's Conflict Between Newfound Freedom in the UK and Traditional Eastern European Expectations of Body Image and Beauty
5. Battling Cultural Pressures: Patriarchal Ideals and Unrealistic, Appearance-Focused Expectations Versus Personal Authenticity

4.4.1 Under the Patriarchal Lens: Alla's Confusion in a Beauty-Obsessed Society"

Alla's story explores the beauty and body standards in Belarusian culture and their impact on her BI perceptions. She observed that social media perpetuated specific ideals for Belarusian women—tall, blonde, blue-eyed, and slim, but not excessively so—standards ingrained across generations through discussions with her grandmother and mother. These ideals, shaped by patriarchal society, were further reinforced by Western media and peer

pressure, compelling her to strive for seemingly unattainable beauty. Alla's immersion in magazines like "Elle Girl" dictated beauty practices and lifestyle choices, perpetuating a cycle of comparison that linked self-worth to the physical appearance championed in Western media. Alla noted that diet culture often emphasised salads as the pinnacle of health, starkly contrasting with the traditional, hearty meals of her upbringing such as potatoes, grechka (buckwheat), and meat served at home. This contrast underscored a significant cultural contradiction: Alla felt expected to maintain a hearty diet while remaining slender, creating an unattainable standard for her. She highlighted that the media's BI ideals were often unrealistic and difficult, if not impossible, for most to achieve, resulting in ongoing dissatisfaction and pressure to conform to these standards.

Extract 1:

> *"it's just, yeah, it's always unattainable, and it's, I think the biggest issue is the way it's portrayed everywhere and how it's portrayed when women do have a different body type, and what the narrative is around it like, you know they are the worst ones, but they stick the most in the head. Those headlines where it's like, oh, she let herself."*
>
> (A 18 lines 23-30).

Alla's comment revealed her acute awareness of the pervasive and unattainable beauty standards that have affected her self-perception. She underscored the internalised feelings of inadequacy these standards instilled in her, reflecting her personal struggle with the unrealistic expectations perpetuated by the media.

Delving into these influences, Alla examined the dichotomy of femininity, where girls were often categorised as either attractive and *"cool"* or modest and focused on their studies. She expressed frustration at balancing academic success with social acceptance, highlighting the rigid social structures prevalent in her adolescence. Knowing that boys often judged girls based on physical attractiveness added pressure for her to align with masculine expectations. She recognised that dressing in revealing clothing or engaging casually with boys could lead to derogatory labels like *"easy"* or *"accessible,"* intensifying her conflict between the desire for acceptance and the need for authenticity. This pressure compelled her to conform to narrow identities that stifled her self-expression.

Extract 2:

"It was a juggling act you were trying to not upset your parents, be seen by peers in a certain way, especially boys or yeah, your friends and also not to piss anyone off. Not to take anyone's place, you know. So, it was like a very weird place."

(A 15 lines 21-28).

This extract demonstrated how Alla navigated complex social dynamics marked by pressures to conform to familial expectations and peer influences, shaping her identity. The need to please her parents, fit in with peers, especially boys, and maintain her individuality created a conflicting environment. This also revealed the patriarchal underpinnings of social interactions, where female behaviour is scrutinised, particularly in the context of male approval. Her desire to avoid upsetting others while seeking acceptance led Alla to struggle to establish her identity amid external pressures. These insights highlighted how traditional patriarchal values interacted with Western ideals of beauty and femininity, permeating Belarusian culture and hindering Alla's ability to be authentic and fully accept herself.

4.4.2 Intergenerational Patriarchal Messages: Reconciling Family Affection with Prescribed Body Ideals

Alla further explored the contradictory societal messages surrounding BI. On one hand, one could *"be whoever you want to be,"* but on the other, she felt the weight of societal preferences suggesting that looking a certain way was *"nicer."* Central to Alla's narrative was the recognition of her family's influence in shaping these contradictory views on BI, particularly through the expectations and comments made by her mother and grandmother. She evoked vivid imagery by referencing a *"figure of a guitar,"* alongside culturally specific measurements, as insightful symbols of the stringent beauty standards that often bewilder young girls:

Extract 3:

"She would like spoil me with sweets and like make me pancakes like any Russian grandma would but also she would always say that you're supposed to be 90, 60, 90. You're supposed to have the figure of a guitar. And that was very contradictory, very confusing to a child. And also, I didn't understand why I have to be 90-60-90 when I was like 12."

(A3 lines 42-50).

This extract showed how Alla recounted fond memories of her grandmother, whose hopes for Alla to embody a specific figure, coupled with her indulgent nature, created contradictions that underscore the challenge of navigating identity amidst conflicting cultural messages, complicating her self-image. Alla also shared the term *"pampuschka,"* (cute bubbly, a little bit chubby person). While this term carried a sense of warmth and endearment, it also encapsulated the dual reality of acceptance and pressure that defined Alla's experience. On one hand, being called a *"pampushka"* signified a kind of affection and approval from her mother, fostering a sense of belonging; on the other hand, it implied an implicit expectation to conform to a particular body type that aligned with traditional notions of femininity.

This generational transmission of expectations in Alla's life highlighted the persistence of deeply rooted beauty norms, often clashing with Western ideals that promote diversity and inclusion. While these standards were perpetuated by women like her grandmother, they clearly reflected entrenched patriarchal values. For Alla, the emphasis on specific measurements and body shape expectations, such as the 90-60-90 figure and the *"guitar-shaped"* body, epitomised a patriarchal gaze that objectified women, tying her worth to her ability to conform to these ideals. The pressure she faced as a young girl emphasised the impact of these values on her self-esteem and identity formation, potentially leading to lasting effects on her BI.

4.4.3 Navigating Shame and Silence: Alla's Struggle with Body Image in a Patriarchal Society

As Alla's narrative unfolded, she recounted a childhood marked by a simple and content relationship with her body, which shifted during adolescence. This pivotal period reshaped her self-image and sparked a desire to delay puberty due to discomfort with her physical changes. Feelings of shame took hold, leading her to *"cover"* herself and internalise societal expectations surrounding modesty and beauty. Throughout this time, Alla grappled with the pressure to appear attractive while fearing judgment for caring too much about her looks. This tension underscored intense social pressures to conform to cultural norms prioritising a slim figure, fair skin, and traits associated with traditional femininity, all while emphasising modesty and restraint.

Her dynamics with peers were complex, as she navigated BI issues without direct discussion. Alla reflected on the difficulty of addressing these issues and the unspoken acceptance present within her social circles. However, conversations about appearance often felt awkward, which fostered a culture of silence. Her admission that her relationship with her body was *"very private"* encapsulated her isolation and longing for deeper connections. In contrast to the celebratory portrayals of puberty in American media, Alla described her journey into womanhood as solitary, deepening her feelings of loneliness. She recognised the stereotypes surrounding femininity and noted that the reserved attitudes in her family, particularly the mother-daughter dynamic, left her without guidance during these formative years. This absence of dialogue compounded her isolation, especially as her friends were at different developmental stages. Cultural norms further discouraged open discussions about intimate changes, intensifying her emotional solitude. In Belarusian society, discussions of puberty were silenced, forcing Alla to navigate this critical period alone. Her repeated references to *"shame"* underscored her discomfort with her transformations, compounded by a lack of support. Positioning herself as the focal point of her narrative, Alla expressed ownership of her shame and discomfort. Using collective pronouns like *"we,"* she aligned her experience with a broader cultural narrative rooted in Belarusian norms that emphasised modesty and strict beauty ideals.

4.4.4 Alla's Conflict Between Newfound Freedom in the UK and Traditional Eastern European Expectations of Body Image and Beauty

In her ongoing exploration, Alla acknowledged a shift in her BI perception and a newfound liberation she experienced after moving to the UK. This transition, marked by significant life changes, symbolised more than just a geographical shift; it represented a pivotal moment in her personal development. Her statement, *"I felt more liberated"*, encapsulated her relief upon discovering an environment that allowed diverse forms of self-expression to flourish.

Extract 4:

> *"I felt the pressure go away as much and I saw that there are so many other people, and their worth is not attached to their body image".*
>
> (A 23 lines 10-13).

This newfound freedom contrasted sharply with the experiences she associated with her original home, emphasising how societal acceptance in London cultivated a supportive atmosphere where individuality was valued. Alla noticed a significant transition in her sports preferences, shifting from engaging in yoga back home as a sign of femininity to embracing strength training, which she no longer viewed as being *"just for men."* This signalled a maturation in her mindset, moving away from gendered views of sports and an aesthetic focus to one that valued health and capability. Alla recognised a cultural acceptance of varied identities where unique hairstyles and fashion choices were not only accepted but celebrated. This artistic expression reinforced her connection to a community that respected diversity and fostered a sense of belonging which was missing back in Belarus.

Nonetheless, Alla grappled with the delicate balance between embracing her newfound liberation in London and upholding the values of discipline, health, and fitness she inherited from Belarus. This interplay reflected a complex negotiation between adhering to traditional beauty standards that emphasised a slim figure and youthful appearance and forging her own path toward personal authenticity and freedom in her new environment. Furthermore, her self-reflection revealed the intricacies of navigating identity within UK culture, which often promoted self-expression while simultaneously fostering an obsession with physical appearance. For instance, Alla shared a photograph she posted on Instagram during this challenging period. She reflected on how her dissatisfaction with her appearance in the image impacted her memories and interactions with others, highlighting how deeply BI concerns could influence her self-perception. Despite her advocacy for self-acceptance and her encouragement of friends to embrace their unique beauty she learnt in the UK, Alla admitted she continued to struggle with these issues. This experience illustrated the disparity between the carefully curated persona she presented online and her genuine emotions at the time the photo was taken. By intentionally cropping the image, she crafted an appearance that aligned with her desired public image, effectively masking her true insecurities. This internal conflict underscored the ongoing challenge she faced in balancing diverse societal expectations with personal acceptance and well-being. This tendency reflected the broader societal pressures present in both Belarusian and Western cultures, including the pervasive expectation to conform to unrealistic beauty standards that prioritise thinness, youthfulness, and attractiveness affecting individuals' authenticity and self-presentation.

As Alla reflected further, she recognised the tendency to appreciate past versions of herself while feeling inadequate in the present moment, highlighting the critical self-awareness that often gives rise to insecurities shown that BI is situational depending on the context. In sharing her narrative, Alla shed some light on the conflicting nature of BI, appreciation mingled with dissatisfaction:

Extract 5:

> *"But in that picture, for example, I took it and I was like, yeah, I look good, but at the same day, maybe I would be thinking that, you know, I still need to lose weight, or I still need to tone up or whatever".*
>
> (A 22 lines 12-16).

Alla's words revealed her internal conflict: she acknowledged appreciation for her appearance in the photograph but quickly fell into self-criticism and societal pressures to conform to narrow beauty ideals. This highlighted a deep-rooted struggle between self-acceptance and the relentless pursuit of perfection shaped by external influences. Her experience illustrated that BI is not a static perception but rather a fluid and fluctuating state, where moments of self-affirmation coexist with feelings of inadequacy.

4.4.5 Battling Cultural Pressures: Patriarchal Ideals and Unrealistic, Appearance-Focused Expectations Versus Personal Authenticity

In her closing reflections, Alla contemplated her complex relationship with BI and expressed a desire for BI not to dominate her self-worth, demonstrating profound self-awareness of the external pressures contributing to her insecurities. Through her journey, Alla advocated for acceptance and authenticity, encouraging her audience to reflect on their own relationships with BI and identity. Throughout the interview, she oscillated between *"I"* and broader terms, creating a dialogue with her audience and underscoring the shared experiences of women confronting similar pressures. This approach fostered inclusivity, making her narrative relatable while capturing the evolving and ever-changing nature of BI.

Alla emphasised that self-acceptance is a journey influenced by personal experiences, cultural contexts, and the myriad societal expectations that shape lived realities. In recounting her journey, she identified specific cultural expectations from her Belarusian background, such as the emphasis on traditional beauty standards that prioritise a slim figure and youthful

appearance that were often reinforced by familial pressure and patriarchal societal norms dictating what it meant to be a *"desirable"* woman. Her relocation to London marked a crucial shift from prioritising external appearances to focusing on health and well-being. This evolution illustrated her efforts to redefine her identity beyond these limiting cultural attributes. As she integrated her newfound strength into her daily life, Alla acknowledged the importance of resilience and authenticity, asserting that personal worth could not be confined to fleeting beauty ideals.

In conclusion, Alla advocated for deeper conversations about BI that transcended superficial standards, emphasising the need for acceptance of diverse body types and the importance of empathy in addressing the pervasive and often damaging influence of societal beauty norms. Her narrative became more than a personal story; it served as a call to action for collective reflection and understanding, resonating widely within society.

4.5 'Tamara':

Tamara is a Ukrainian woman who has lived in London for the past five years, working as a model and actress. Her story explores the profound impact of patriarchal expectations on her self-worth, highlighting the sacrifices she made in her relentless pursuit of approval of her father. As she navigated the male gaze, influenced by media-driven ideals, Tamara grappled with her desire to be *"loved,"* reconciling her Ukrainian heritage with the curviness celebrated in UK standards.

List of Tamara's Themes

1. Fatherly Influence: The Pressure of Patriarchy on Tamara's Body Image and Her Drive for Approval
2. Sacrificing Nutrition for Style: The Price of Body Ideals for Tamara
3. Navigating the Male Gaze: Tamara's Journey Through Media-Driven Beauty Standards and Patriarchal Ideals
4. The Struggle to be "Loved" and "The Best for My Man"
5. Tamara's Transformation and Struggle Between the Slenderness of Ukrainian Ideals and the Curviness of UK Standards

4.5.1 Fatherly Influence: The Pressure of Patriarchy on Tamara's Body Image and Her Drive for Approval

Tamara's ideals of BI and perception of beauty were profoundly shaped by her father's expectations. His lifelong engagement with sports instilled in her values of physical fitness, movement, and flexibility, attributes he deemed essential for women. Within Ukrainian norms, these values aligned with a cultural emphasis on women's physical appearance, reinforcing the belief that women should maintain a fit physique as a reflection of their worth. This pressure compelled Tamara to conform to beauty standards that prioritise slimness and youth, while her father's voice became a guiding force, consistently emphasising the importance of physical fitness and appearance. This paternal influence mirrored the common patriarchal norms in Ukrainian families, where a father's opinions significantly impact household dynamics and shape daughters' identities. Tamara acknowledged her father's expectations, illustrating his role in constructing her understanding of beauty.

Extract 1:

> *"But I think it's coming from my childhood, from my family because I saw how much my father wanted my mum to take care of herself and her body. And I realised that maybe for men it's one of the most important things, which is not... But that's what I thought. And that's what is stuck in my head."*
>
> (T 32 lines 4-10).

This extract highlights the deep-rooted influence of Tamara's upbringing on her perceptions of self-worth and beauty. By observing her father's strong emphasis on her mother's appearance, Tamara internalised the idea that physical attractiveness is paramount, especially from a male perspective. This belief, though she acknowledges it may not be universally important, has left a lasting imprint on her self-image. The revelation underscores how familial dynamics can shape individuals' values and expectations, particularly regarding appearance, illustrating the pervasive impact of patriarchal norms on women's self-perception. The transition from discussing her feelings to addressing societal perceptions revealed the contrast between Tamara's internal voice and collective views, illustrating her internal conflict as she reconciled her beliefs about BI with those imposed by family and society. The phrase *"that's what is stuck in my head"* suggested that she has internalised these expectations and influences, indicating the complex relationship between personal and societal impacts on self-image.

In contrast to her sports-oriented father, Tamara described her mother as someone who avoided the gym, saying (T 9 line 4), *"she would do everything but go to the gym."* Despite admiring her mother's model-like appearance, Tamara often criticised her for not adopting what she considered appropriate health practices. This dynamic highlighted Tamara's internal conflict, as she felt responsible for encouraging her mother to exercise, influenced by her father's views on BI and fitness. Tamara noted her father's dissatisfaction with her mother's lack of engagement in sports, reflecting broader societal expectations about gender and fitness. This dissatisfaction reinforced patriarchal norms that often positioned men as arbiters of health and placed pressure on women to conform to these standards. Such expectations not only affected family dynamics but also perpetuated the notion that a woman's worth was tied to adherence to specific fitness ideals.

Tamara's experiences included not only active participation in sports but also watching competitions, including beauty and sport pageants, alongside her father. A pivotal moment occurred while watching *"Miss Bikini Ukraine,"* when her father expressed skepticism about her success, saying (T 4 line 6-7), *"Of course not, because people spend years to get to the semi-finals."* His doubt fuelled her determination to prove him wrong, highlighting how the quest for parental approval can motivate ambition. While her father's influence encouraged her entry into competitive fitness, his skepticism pushed Tamara to strive harder and overcome perceived limitations.

Competing in *"Miss Bikini Ukraine,"* Tamara embraced her father's emphasis on discipline and achievement in sports while also seeking validation. Her victories in the semi-finals and as the overall winner showcased her dedication and hard work, especially considering her lack of prior experience in sports. She remarked (T 5 lines 2-3), *"Everyone was surprised because I prepared for three months and I won,"* which challenged her father's belief that true success requires years of effort. This dynamic allowed her to address his skepticism while asserting her independence.

Despite striving for success in a beauty competition, Tamara maintained a critical perspective, juxtaposing idealism, and ambition with the realities of the industry. Preparing for the competition involved strict dieting, leading her to lose her period for a month, this illustrated the risks and sacrifices made for an ideal physique. Her narrative highlighted the tension between her achievements and personal well-being, prompting reflection on societal

acceptance of such costs. Tamara's story served as a thoughtful exploration of the sacrifices associated with pursuing beauty and body ideals. Winning the title not only represented her achievement but also echoed broader cultural voices that celebrate idealised feminine body types.

4.5.2 Sacrificing Nutrition for Style: The Price of Body Ideals for Tamara

Apart from mother's expertise in food quality, as she worked at a "sanapedemstancia"- a health facility focused on improving public health through nutrition and wellness, Tamara's relationship with food was shaped by another factor. She stated (T 15 line 2), *"I came from a poor family,"* establishing a context that shaped her relationship with food suggesting that her financial situation influenced her priorities regarding health and self-image. For instance, she noted (T 15 lines 3-5), *"if I had 50 hryvnia, I would better save this money and buy for myself a nice skirt,"* indicating she prioritised clothing over nutritional needs. Tamara's inclination to forgo food for the sake of financial priorities signified a troubling relationship with nutrition, where she equated financial choices with enhancing her appearance. Further, the stark statement, *"I just didn't eat,"* reflected a detachment from nutrition and suggested a normalisation of unhealthy eating habits shaped by financial constraints. While she asserted it was her decision, her agency in these decisions existed within the constraints imposed by her socioeconomic status. The idea of *"buying a nice skirt and losing weight"* illustrated the societal emphasis on physical appearance over health, revealing that her self-worth may be intertwined with her clothing and BI. She expressed that she felt she was *"winning double,"* highlighting a complex psychology where restricting food intake served both financial prudence and adherence to beauty ideals that value thinness. This lens also sheds light on cultural attitudes toward BI and consumerism, suggesting that in some contexts, owning fashionable clothing may be prioritised over food security.

4.5.3 Navigating the Male Gaze: Tamara's Journey Through Media-Driven Beauty Standards and Patriarchal Ideals

Tamara reflected on a time of innocence when she was minimally aware of her physical self; however, as she entered adolescence, she noticed a shift as she began to observe other girls receiving *"attention from people,"* which significantly altered her self-

evaluation and was heavily influenced by her peers. This period was critical for self-discovery, characterised by heightened sensitivity to others' opinions about physical appearance. Her statement (T 16 lines 4-5), *"when you see guys looking at that girl,"* underscored how male attention became a benchmark for attractiveness, prompting her desire to emulate those who received such validation. Tamara understood that attention focused on a specific type of woman's appearance and behaviour, reflecting societal beliefs that link femininity to desirability and emphasising the pressure to conform to beauty standards. Her realisation that (T 16 lines 6-7) *"you subconsciously want to become like her"* demonstrated the significant influence of societal norms on her identity development.

Tamara noted that beauty ideals were deeply embedded in the patriarchal society of Ukraine, heavily influenced by media representations. Her narrative implied how rigid gender roles shaped her perceptions of beauty, highlighting her awareness of the "male gaze." This awareness inspired her to adopt a more active lifestyle and *"get sporty,"* emphasising the pressure on women to conform to male-dictated standards. Tamara noted that media, particularly shows like the *"Victoria's Secret show,"* affected male views of beauty by promoting narrow representations of women and propagating ideals of femininity and desirability, pressuring women to conform. Her reflection, *"that's why we were working to be like them,"* highlighted how media-driven standards often lead women to modify their appearances, resulting in struggles with self-acceptance and a sense of obligation to adhere to these ideals. However, acknowledging the push to be *"trendy,"* she critiqued it, stating, *"And I don't think it's right,"* which revealed her internal conflict between external influences and her beliefs about health.

Tamara's recognition of the patriarchal structures within her culture demonstrated her awareness of the broader framework that dictated beauty standards. Her use of the term *"we"* underscored the shared experiences of women in Eastern Europe, highlighting the systemic nature of these pressures.

4.5.4 The Struggle to be "Loved" and "The Best for My Man"

Tamara's journey highlighted the challenges she faced regarding her BI stemming from her past relationship. She felt insecure, especially when she noticed her ex-partner's attention to other women, which fuelled a deep-seated insecurity about her worth and

attractiveness. Her desire to be *"loved"* and recognised as *"the best for my man"* underscored her conflict between self-worth and external validation. This perception of competition with other women, along with her feelings of shyness during intimacy, revealed that BI issues extend beyond physical appearance to encompass deeper mental perceptions and self-confidence.

In seeking approval, Tamara felt pressured to alter her appearance to conform to societal beauty ideals that emphasised feminine shapes and sizes. She reflected on her belief that achieving her desired figure naturally through exercise would be ideal, expressing frustration at the limitations of this approach, which led to her decision to undergo breast surgery. This choice illustrated how societal norms link specific physical traits to beauty and desirability, normalising cosmetic procedures as a path to achieve these ideals. She believed that without surgical intervention, she would struggle to attain the ideal figure, connecting her sense of powerlessness to deeper issues of low self-esteem shaped by societal pressures. Despite undergoing surgery, Tamara maintained a cautious attitude, recognising the potential risks involved and feeling a responsibility when advising others, even though her own experience was positive. Her satisfaction with the results boosted her confidence and opened up professional opportunities, such as modelling, again highlighting the interplay between societal standards and perceived self-worth.

Tamara's narrative linked femininity and body curves with cultural notions that associate physical traits not only with aesthetics but also with women's reproductive roles, reflecting evolutionary and biological underpinnings. She noted that women's bodies are frequently tied to reproductive roles, which influence human preferences. While she acknowledged the media's impact on these perceptions, she argued that innate human instincts also play a significant role. However, this perspective risks reinforcing traditional gender dynamics and stereotypes centred on physical attributes and maternal capabilities. Viewing attraction through a male-centric lens can overshadow women's autonomy and broader qualities, perpetuating culturally entrenched stereotypes.

4.5.5 Tamara's Transformation and Struggle Between the Slenderness of Ukrainian Ideals and the Curviness of UK Standards

In her concluding reflections, Tamara delved on how femininity was previously defined by being skinny, wearing heels, short dresses, and having long hair back in Ukraine. Her statement, *"if I lived in Ukraine, I would be even skinnier,"* highlighted the cultural pressure in her homeland to maintain a thinner physique, underscoring the contrast between UK and Ukrainian perspectives on BI. However, after moving to London, she acknowledged valuing *"personality and authenticity,"* moving away from conventional beauty standards and embracing individuality. This transformation was influenced by her new experiences, including going to the gym and *"actually eating more."* Yet, she noticed a change in beauty and body ideals which she simultaneously felt pressured to conform to:

Extract 2:

> *"I moved to London, it's all about to have a good big bum. Yeah, well, I keep going to the gym and making kind of big bum, but me personally, I prefer to be skinny and to do yoga all the time. But with high heels and everything... Honestly, I prefer what we had in Ukraine cause you put an effort… You feel yourself differently... You know, you feel yourself actually pretty when you go somewhere."*
>
> (T 34 lines 1-9).

Tamara's use of the term *"bum"* to describe the Western ideal of desirability highlighted how physical attributes were often commodified, reflecting a broader trend of objectification that transcended cultural boundaries. In London, where a *"good big bum"* was celebrated as a beauty standard, women faced pressure to conform, demonstrating how societal norms dictated attractiveness. In contrast, Tamara preferred the beauty standards from Ukraine, which emphasised slenderness and the discipline associated with activities like yoga. This distinction exposed her internal conflict and discomfort with the objectification that was prevalent in both cultures, albeit expressed differently. While Western trends celebrated curvaceous figures and their sexual allure, EE standards tied beauty to elegance and refinement, rooted in effort and self-presentation. Tamara's journey illustrated the ongoing negotiation between imposed beauty norms and her personal values in defining her BI.

She acknowledged (T 17 lines 3-4), *"With time and the standards in our world, everything changes,"* recognising that beauty ideals were not static but evolved with media representation, cultural trends, and social movements. Her experience underscored the

persistent tension between personal authenticity and societal expectations regarding women's appearances. She grappled with the belief that a woman's worth was tied to her looks, heavily influenced by her father's perspective on her mother's beauty. Despite these conflicting feelings, Tamara asserted (T 30 lines 1-2), *"I pretty much feel always confident about my body,"* attributing her confidence to her commitment to enhancing her appearance. While beauty standards differed between Ukraine and the UK, the underlying expectation placed on women to conform to certain norms remained consistent. In Ukraine, beauty often aligned with a traditional image valuing elegance and effort, whereas the UK tended to celebrate curviness and self-empowerment. Both cultures imposed expectations that compelled Tamara to navigate a landscape where her worth was frequently measured against societal beauty standards, highlighting the complexity of these dynamics in her pursuit of balance between contemporary trends and her cultural upbringing.

4.6. "Karina"

Karina, a 38-year-old Latvian woman born and raised in Riga, has lived in London for the past 14 years and works in real estate. Katrina's journey navigated a complex interplay between her inner values and external appearance as shaped by family guidance. She experienced a tension between the conservative roots of her upbringing and the fashion-forward atmosphere of Riga, leading to a struggle in balancing identity. Her transition from innocence to awareness over ten years highlighted the evolving perceptions of beauty she encountered.

List of Karina's Themes

1. The Dual Narrative: Katrina's Inner Values Versus External Appearance in Family Guidance
2. A Tension in Identity: Between Conservative Roots of Family and School and Fashion-Forward Riga
3. From Innocence to Awareness: Karina's Teen Years and Beauty Perception
4. Between Two Worlds: Navigating Beauty Standards from Riga to London
5. Karina's Journey Toward Authenticity and Self-Acceptance

4.6.1 The Dual Narrative: Katrina's Inner Values Versus External Appearance in Family Guidance

Karina's understanding of BI and self-identity was profoundly shaped by her childhood experiences, where self-worth was tied to growth and character, not looks. At home, appearances were rarely discussed; instead, her family nurtured her talents. Her grandmother instilled the belief that deeds outweigh appearances, a lesson that became deeply ingrained in Karina's mindset. Encouraged to play the piano, sing, and attend art school, Karina focused on honing her skills rather than her appearance. Her grandmother's guidance influenced her beauty practices, such as delaying the use of mascara. By stating, *"I only started much later,"* Karina highlighted the societal pressures faced by girls in her environment, where wearing mascara was a norm. This contrast between her grandmother's advice and her peers' experiences illustrated the tension between traditional values of homogeneity promoted by her grandmother and contemporary beauty standards of self-expression. Through reflection, Karina expressed gratitude for her grandmother's guidance, viewing these lessons as protective and vital to her later self-acceptance. This approach reinforced the idea that beauty manifests in various forms beyond physical appearance.

Despite her grandmother's emphasis on character, Karina recounted a memory that starkly contradicted this teaching. She recalled a photograph taken when she was five years old, sitting proudly at a nursery table. Yet, this joyful memory was later overshadowed by her grandmother's remark:

Extract 1:

> *"Oh, when you were a small girl, you were so ugly. And after you became to change and you started to be, you know, more feminine rather than… No, she said it in a good way."*
>
> (K 23 lines 6-10).

The extract starkly revealed how early Karina might have faced expectations to be *"feminine"*. Her grandmother's comment reflected a deeply ingrained cultural norm prioritising physical attractiveness, even in children. Such judgments directed at a five-year-old underscored how early these expectations might have begun shaping Karina's self-perception around entrenched gender norms. Despite the harshness of being labeled *"ugly"* as a child, Karina interpreted her grandmother's comment as an expression of affection and

care, framed within the context of her growth and perceived improvement in regards of conventional femininity allowing Karina to rationalise the criticism despite its hurtful undertones. Such remarks profoundly impacted Karina's self-esteem, highlighting the conflict between familial love and critical expectations and revealing subtle pressure to meet societal standards of femininity.

Karina also noted how her sense of self, particularly her BI and appearance, was shaped significantly by her mother's critical voice. Comments like (K 7 lines 4-5), *"Oh, you know what? That's not good,"* frequently targeted Karina's style when it failed to align with conventional femininity of being a *"lady"*. Her mother's emphasis on elegant and classy attire underscored an expectation to conform to gendered ideals of beauty and presentation. Although Karina recognised her mother's intent as well-meaning, it underscored the heavy burden of familial pressures in shaping her identity. She observed how these criticisms stemmed not from malice but from ingrained societal beliefs about how females ought to appear and act.

Even after moving to London, her mother's influence remained in her life. During visits to Riga, her mother consistently critiqued Karina's appearance, commenting on her weight gain, which reflected a persistent expectation for Karina to conform to certain body standards. While Karina had found these comments difficult to handle in the past, she now understood her mother's intentions, recognising that her mother wanted the best for her, even if her approach felt harsh. This dynamic positioned Karina close to her mother, who embodied traditional beauty standards rooted in patriarchal expectations about women's appearances and their presentation. Karina recalled a recent *"humorous incident"* that highlighted her family's expectations regarding looks, specifically her mother's critique of her casual attire.

Extract 2:

> *"Mum is always saying, what is this? What is this? I say, oh, this is Gucci. She is like: I said, I don't care where it's from or how much it costs because you have to look as a lady. That's the thing. I don't like these hoodies, so don't come to me ever dressed like this. Full stop. So I have to think what I'm wearing next time I go back home."*
>
> (K2 lines 37-41).

This underscored the lingering influence of familial standards and revealed that her family also placed a strong emphasis on looks, a realisation Karina had not fully grasped initially. This moment helped her understand that while her family prioritised substance, they also valued appearance, shaping her evolving sense of style. Karina's family voices presented a conflicting web of supportive yet critical messages about her appearance, BI, and self-worth. This contradiction laid the foundation for Karina's ongoing journey toward self-acceptance, challenging her to reconcile external perceptions with her intrinsic value.

4.6.2 Between Conservative Roots of Family and School and Fashion-Forward Riga: A Tension in Identity

Both Karina's home and school emphasised talents and skills over appearances. She recalled that there was little focus on physical appearance at her school too, enabling her and her classmates to concentrate on their studies and personal development. However, one incident stood out to her: a girl in her class wore mascara and was reprimanded by the teacher. This interaction highlighted the conservative nature of their school regarding beauty practices, reinforcing the preference for natural appearance and homogeneity echoed from USSR. This environment helped Karina to form an understanding of beauty and self-worth based on internal values, in contrast to the fashion-driven Riga she observed around her creating an interesting tension between her family's and school teachings and societal expectations. She recalled (K 12 lines 1-3), *"We had the most fashionable ladies,"* noting that women were expected to dress elegantly, with the coordination of dresses, shoes, and accessories seen as essential to being a *"lady."* This attention to style even influenced her interview preparation, ensuring everything matched in colour.

Karina recalled the challenge of wanting to look beautiful as a child without access to expensive clothes due to financial strains. These limitations sparked her creativity and fuelled her desire for self-expression. She learned to sew and often bought fabric to create her own clothes, a skill nurtured in her school's practical skills class, known as "труд" (trud), which translates to labor or work. These classes, divided by gender, focused on practical skills such as cooking, sewing, and other domestic tasks, reflecting the traditional gender roles of the time. By acknowledging her process of *"creating my own fashion,"* Karina showed the

influence of her personal aspirations amidst external pressures, showcasing her own agency in navigating societal standards.

Karina's journey through the fashion-centric culture of Riga and the practical focus of her school and home environments profoundly shaped her perception of self-worth and identity. Psychologically, these contrasting influences fostered a balanced view that prioritised personal development and creativity over societal beauty standards. Her lack of access to branded clothing, rather than diminishing her self-worth, spurred her ingenuity and self-reliance. By learning to create her own clothes, Karina expressed her individuality and embraced the understanding that beauty is not merely about appearance but about skill and character. This journey encouraged her to navigate the balance between cultural norms and her own identity, leading her to embrace a more personal and creative approach to fashion.

4.6.3 From Innocence to Awareness: Karina's Teen Years and Beauty Perception

From an early age, Karina regarded herself as a *"star"* in the girly outfits encouraged by her mother and paid little attention to her body. However, entering adolescence and embracing a more traditionally feminine identity heightened her awareness of her evolving appearance and the external judgments that accompanied it. She began to perceive herself as *"more feminine,"* reflecting a shifting self-image and the pressure to conform, which led her to struggle with her perceptions of beauty, often at odds with societal expectations. Frequently comparing herself to her peers, she felt that other girls were much more beautiful, underscoring her insecurities and competitive feelings shaped by societal standards.

Despite these insecurities and her changing body, Karina emphasised that she valued self-worth based on personality rather than physical appearance. She remarked (K 15 lines 2-5), *"It was not something, of course, I felt… I thought if boys liked me…"* This statement highlighted her internal conflict between societal beauty ideals and her desire for meaningful connections, revealing her effort to seek validation beyond looks. She acknowledged that her family and school shielded her from harsh societal concepts, describing herself as *"very, very pure."* While this protective environment preserved her innocence, it contrasted sharply with the judgmental beauty standards she encountered elsewhere.

The fashion-driven and patriarchal influences in Latvia placed importance on specific beauty traits, which constrained individuality and reinforced gender expectations, shaping

Karina's self-perception. Although she placed high importance on inner qualities, she often diverted attention back to her looks. During her teens, she became self-conscious about specific features, particularly her nose, which she felt had a noticeable bump. Karina recalled promising herself she would undergo rhinoplasty when she was older, stating (K 16 lines 5-6), *"I said to myself when I grow up, I definitely do the nose job"*- a belief influenced by magazines dictating beauty standards. Another memorable incident in her self-image journey occurred at a swimming pool in Riga, where a boy commented that she had a *"very big bum,"* leaving her feeling self-conscious. Karina noted, *"I didn't understand what it means,"* indicating her struggle to navigate her understanding of femininity amidst others' comments, further compounding her feelings of doubt.

Throughout the interview, Karina provided contradictory examples of herself and her family emphasising appearance while consistently redirecting the conversation to the importance of inner beauty, a concept deeply nurtured by her family. She consciously gravitated toward this idea to confront unrealistic and superficial patriarchal standards while seeking solace in her struggle to fit into rigid EE beauty ideals.

4.6.4 Between Two Worlds: Navigating Beauty Standards from Riga to London

After moving to London at 24, Karina noticed that many women in London invested heavily in their appearance, focusing on makeup, designer clothes, and cosmetic procedures. *"I saw ladies always wearing mascara and full makeup,"* she remarked, contrasting this with her more natural style. Feeling pressure to compete with her affluent peers, who wore luxury brands, Karina was constrained by her finances, often shopping at Primark and H&M instead of Harrods. *"I wanted to be like these girls, but I didn't have money,"*(K 19 lines 7-8) she admitted, highlighting the economic disparity that affected her self-esteem and sense of belonging. Nevertheless, her unique style attracted compliments, as her colleagues appreciated her refreshing professional attire, high-waisted trousers and crisp shirts that made her feel comfortable and confident.

Karina contrasted the *"pure and amazing"* EE beauty with London's evolving ideals, critiquing the trend of women chasing ever-changing beauty fads through fillers and permanent makeup, which she felt diminished authenticity. She reflected on the cultural pressures for women to conform to superficial standards, noting the influence of social media

and celebrities like Kim Kardashian, which prompted many young women to undergo procedures for idealised appearances. Despite these pressures, Karina took pride in maintaining her natural look, having *"not done anything"* to alter her body. This commitment reinforced her belief in preserving one's unique identity and deepened her understanding of beauty, extending beyond societal norms. Through her experiences, Karina navigated the tension between her EE roots and the high-maintenance beauty culture in the UK, embracing her authentic self.

4.6.5 Karina's Journey Toward Authenticity and Self-Acceptance

Karina's journey toward authenticity was further shaped by contrasting views on EE beauty. During visits to Latvia, she noted that (K 11 line 28) *"everywhere, women are wearing makeup to please everyone,"* which highlighted the traditional beauty standards imposed on women, in stark contrast to her earlier remark about the *"pure beauty of EE women."* This realisation catalysed her transformation, prompting her to navigate her self-image amid these cultural norms. It also reflected the changes she observed back home as Western trends began to influence Eastern Europe. Insights from clients further fuelled this shift, particularly when a male client described her as *"young"* and *"fresh"* without makeup during a FaceTime call. This comment challenged her internal narratives and encouraged her to embrace her natural appearance, marking a pivotal turn toward authenticity. However, the feedback also hinted at her deeper need for validation from men, rooted in patriarchal values from Eastern Europe. Thus, her journey involved reconciling these traditional influences with her pursuit of personal authenticity and self-acceptance.

Her relationship with makeup evolved significantly. Initially feeling more beautiful with mascara, Karina began to appreciate her natural look more, striving for a balance between enhancement and authenticity. Despite societal pressures, she realised that foundation felt like a *"mask,"* prompting her to advocate for a natural self-expression, declaring (K 11 lines 49-50), *"I decided I will be natural and be myself."* This moment was pivotal in her transformation, redirecting her focus from external validation to internal satisfaction. Compliments about her youthful appearance bolstered her confidence, steering her away from face enhancements. Embracing inherent beauty aligned with family teachings and reflected her evolving self-acceptance, celebrating both her *"red carpet"* look and

authentic identity. These insights marked her appreciation for natural beauty and her autonomy to choose between makeup and dressing up or staying natural. Her evolving understanding of beauty and confidence illustrated a progression from societal expectations to personal authenticity. Karina advocated for a focus on self-awareness and authenticity, urging others to critically evaluate societal pressures rather than internalising them:

Extract 3:

> *"Let's give it up. Probably enough to listen to all these fake voices. I think that's the thing is listen to yourself, because you know all these people come and they tell you all of that… And all that is just like the noise. That's unnecessary noise and we take it and we put it close to our heart, you know, and we ruin our health and our life, our destiny because of these crazy things… It is so difficult to be yourself to be who you are".*
>
> (K 24 lines 5-15).

Karina's advice highlighted the transient nature of beauty trends and the dangers of succumbing to external pressures. She critiqued ever-changing standards, particularly those related to body shapes and cosmetic enhancements, and emphasised the importance of listening to oneself rather than being influenced by the *"fake voices"* that dominate societal beauty discussions. Her narrative cautioned against the pressures to conform and the challenge of maintaining an authentic sense of self amid pervasive external influences. Karina urged young women to resist the fleeting allure of beauty trends and prioritise their health and individuality. She advocated for embracing authenticity over conformity and emphasised self-acceptance in the face of societal beauty standards. Expressing frustration at the ephemeral nature of these trends, Karina shared her experiences with cosmetic procedures, admitting that filler treatments led to regrets. She likened this cycle of enhancements to an addiction, stating, *"Once you do it, it's like a drug."* Through this reflection, she critiqued a culture that promotes continuous modification, comparing the resultant homogeneity of beauty to *"copy-paste"* images that erode individuality, underscoring the importance of being genuine in a world often obsessed with appearance.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1. Introduction

Chapter Five: Discussion, the concluding chapter of this research, addresses several key aspects. It analyses the results and situates them within the current body of literature on BI, NA, and CoP. Additionally, the chapter evaluates the quality of the study by highlighting its strengths and limitations and suggesting potential directions for future research. Finally, it considers the implications of this work for clinical practice, services, and CoP.

5.2 Narrative Spectrum of Experiences

5.2.1 Evolving and Ever-Changing Nature of Body Image

This research explored the concept of BI by building on foundational works that emphasise its multifaceted and contradictory nature, influenced by cultural, historical, and societal factors (Cash, 2004; Orbach, 2019; Schilder, 1999). Research findings affirmed these perspectives, demonstrating that participants' personal narratives reflect the complex, dynamic and evolving nature of BI. Participants navigated and reconciled seemingly contradictory perceptions of their bodies, illustrating the concepts of "unfinalisability" and "fluidity" in self-perception (Aveling, 2015; Grogan, 2006). For instance, Daria's narrative embodied a vivid tension between gratitude and dissatisfaction. She expressed moments of appreciation: *"my body is given to me, and I should be grateful for what it does for me,"* yet battled feelings of inadequacy: *"my body needs improvement and isn't good enough."* This internal dialogue revealed how gratitude can coexist with critique, shaping her BI. Similarly, Alla and Karina's stories captured the fluctuation of confidence in their BIs. In London, they felt liberated and empowered by diverse cultural norms; however, returning to their parental homes evoked tension as they navigated the restrictive beauty ideals of their EE backgrounds. This dynamic illustrated how their BIs are not static; instead, they are continually changing as a transformative concept, enhancing our understanding of how individuals engage with their bodies in a complex and evolving manner (Frank, 2012).

Research findings underscore the ongoing process of how participants' relationships with their bodies can be reinterpreted as they are influenced by numerous factors. Participants revealed a range of triggers affecting their body perceptions, with social comparison emerging as a prominent theme that often leads to detrimental effects on self-perception, as supported by social comparison theory (Festinger, 1957). This phenomenon has been

documented in subsequent research (Cash, 2002; Dittmar & Howard, 2004). For instance, Tamara's narrative centred on her valuation of her nose's shape, which was called into question by societal and media pressures. She articulated a shift in perception, noting how comparisons to others undergoing surgery to achieve a smaller nose, which she referred to as a "*piggy nose,*" affected her view of beauty. Despite her reluctance toward that trend, the notion of surgery lingered in her thoughts, exposing an internal conflict driven by external influences. Daria presented a unique case; she described herself as *"on the slim side, like a model"* when comparing herself to others, highlighting a somewhat positive interpretation of comparison. Victoria's narrative of comparison recounted a painful and short-lived liposuction experience, emphasising the journey individuals face while striving to align their self-image with societal standards. Participants grappled with conflicting self-perceptions shaped by prevailing beauty ideals, highlighting the influence of society and social comparison on the dynamic nature of BI narratives (Massumi, 2002).

Additionally, research findings underscore the concept of plural BIs, where participants constantly negotiate and balance a spectrum of self-perceptions. This resonates with the observations made by Massumi (2002) and Riessman (2008) regarding the multiplicity of identity. This pluralistic approach manifests in their stories, either fostering a holistic view of their bodies and contributing to a deeper sense of wholeness or, conversely, leading to a desire to change or reject a part of themselves. For instance, Karina's account of advocating for authenticity illustrates her struggle with her mother's critical comments, highlighting how external dialogues can instigate feelings of self-doubt and prompt her to question her genuine identity, sometimes leading her to reject parts of herself. This dynamic showcases the interplay between internal desires for authenticity and external pressures to conform. This can also be seen in the choices made by participants. Tamara decided to augment her breasts *"to be the best for her man"*. In contrast, Daria's story represents a balanced self-perception; although she thought about surgery after noticing her peers, she ultimately chose to appreciate herself, affirming that she was *"good enough"* without undergoing surgical enhancement. This shows her ability to navigate different BIs, expanding her self-concept while challenging societal stereotypes and expectations (Schnackenberg, 2018).

Overall research findings suggest that BIs are influenced by context and dialogical exchanges, highlighting their multi-vocal nature (Frank, 2012; Goffman, 2006). Challenging contexts significantly impact how individuals position themselves, involving both internal and external dialogues (Aveling et al., 2015). Thus, it offers novel insights into the dialogical nature of BI and the nuanced ways individuals navigate their relationships with their bodies amid internal dialogues, external influences, and societal pressures. These findings highlight that BI is a continually evolving journey shaped by diverse experiences, as participants actively construct their BIs through the interpretation of social narratives, media portrayals, and cultural norms (Orbach, 2019).

5.2.2 The Value of Femininity and Patriarchal Impact on the Transition to Female Body

The literature suggests that BI becomes particularly challenging during critical transitions, such as puberty (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), an observation echoed by participants in this study. Throughout their narratives, a prominent theme emerged: the transition to a curvier, more traditionally feminine body coinciding with an increased awareness of the societal value placed on femininity. This idea aligns with Levinson's (1986) framework of development, which highlights the importance of transitional phases in shaping identity. Participants articulated how their heightened awareness was intricately linked to perceptions of femininity as both desirable to men and culturally preferred, especially within EE countries (Funk & Mueller, 2018). Their accounts vividly portrayed a pivotal shift from a state of *"innocence"* to one of grappling with societal scrutiny and the pressure to conform to idealised standards of femininity.

Within their EE context, participants noted that patriarchal values were particularly pronounced, reinforcing traditional gender roles that equate women's worth with male approval and societal beauty standards (Ibroscheva, 2013). For example, Alla described her encounter with the *"90-60-90"* body shape standard, likening it to a guitar, illustrating the rigid societal ideals imposed on women. This metaphor underscores the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) which asserts that females often experience their bodies as entities assessed by others, a sentiment echoed by all participants as they recalled the male gaze during their teenage years, whether in social settings or within familial contexts. The transition from childhood to womanhood, therefore, involved navigating these restrictive

societal definitions of femininity and beauty, highlighting the pervasive influence of patriarchal values that tie female attractiveness directly to social value (Basabe & Ros, 2005; Watson, 1993). Notably, this research illustrates how these societal pressures are not merely external factors but are deeply internalised within participants, influencing their self-perceptions and BI during critical developmental transitions. This perspective expands the understanding of objectification theory by demonstrating how these cultural and societal narratives shape internal dialogues about self-worth and identity among women in EE contexts.

After moving to Western Europe, some participants crafted narratives of resistance, positioning themselves as critics of patriarchal pressures on women, in line with feminist theory that critiques how these structures shape women's identities and self-perceptions (Ibroscheva, 2013). While some actively resisted these norms, others internalised the imposed expectations, illustrating how the voice of patriarchy profoundly influences their sense of self-worth. Tamara, for example, internalised the belief that her value was contingent upon satisfying and pleasing men, reflecting the objectification discussed in feminist discourse, where women's worth is often measured by their relationships with males (Krivonos & Diatlova, 2020; Peterson et al., 2008). Similarly, Alla's narrative illustrated the extent to which she associated her inner beauty with male approval, highlighting the pervasive influence of external validation. Victoria's narrative further elucidated this point, as she equated her self-worth with the quality of men she attracted, adamantly believing that her body weight directly influenced their interest. This correlation between self-esteem and male attention speaks to the broader feminist concern regarding the societal commodification of women's bodies and their identities (Orbach, 2019).

Participants' stories collectively displayed how deeply ingrained gender dynamics from their EE heritage shape females' body perceptions and self-worth, even as they adapt to new cultural contexts. Notably, the narratives reveal a complex negotiation of identity, where the value placed on femininity and the impact of patriarchal structures significantly influence their transition to womanhood and evolving self-conceptions. This dynamic interplay between resistance and internalisation underscores the challenges women encounter in redefining their identities amidst conflicting societal expectations, illuminating a critical gap in feminist literature regarding the transitional experiences of women navigating multiple

cultural frameworks. This research not only affirms existing feminist theories but also highlights the nuanced ways in which women negotiate their BI identities and challenge ingrained societal norms, contributing novel insights into the discourse on identity formation in patriarchal societies.

The narratives surrounding BI revealed significant transformations and nuanced developments as women relocated to different countries, echoing findings from Bilukha and Utermohlen (2002) on the impact of geographic and cultural shifts on identity. These transformations are vividly illustrated in the participants' dialogues regarding their cultural heritage and new environments. For instance, Tamara and Victoria initially believed that Western society would uphold similar standards of femininity as those in their home cultures, affirming their importance. This aligns with earlier literature that discusses the persistent influence of cultural norms, suggesting that women often carry the weight of these expectations into new contexts (Bakhshi, 2011; Bilukha & Utermohlen, 2002).

In contrast, participants such as Alla, Daria, and Karina experienced a sense of liberation in Western societies, where they perceived a reduction in scrutiny and increased autonomy, allowing them to celebrate their identities free from traditional constraints (Bakhshi, 2011). This newfound freedom in London allowed them to reorganise their understanding of BI, aligning their identities with their authentic selves. This transformation not only enriched their personal journeys but also strengthened their shared experiences and collective identity. This aligns with Castells' (2011) theories on collective identity formation, highlighting participants' need for recognition and empowerment as they resisted dominant social norms of beauty and challenge entrenched power structures of patriarchy.

Throughout participants' narratives, themes of femininity and the impacts of patriarchy reveal how entrenched cultural norms shape their self-perceptions and BI. As they navigate the new cultural landscape of the UK, their stories reflect a significant shift that challenges and redefines these norms. This research highlights participants' voices as acts of persistence and resilience that foster diverse identities, showcasing participants' agency in reshaping societal beauty standards and affirming their identities in the face of external pressures.

5.2.3 Holistic View of and Transformation of Body and a Journey to Authentic Self

Women who relocate to a different country embark on a transformative journey of their identity change (Bilukha & Utermohlen, 2002). The experience of moving abroad serves as a catalyst for profound transformation, offering participants the chance to redefine their BIs (Wingood et al., 2002). Similarly, participants reflected on how their BIs evolved as they adjusted to new cultural contexts and simply as they aged. For example, Alla recounted how studying in London allowed her to experiment with her BI. This experience empowered her to explore new expressions of self, embrace a more "fluid identity" regarding her physical appearance, and cultivate a greater sense of acceptance. Similarly, Daria described a liberating experience as she discovered the freedom to express herself without the limitations she felt in her home country. The diverse and multicultural atmosphere of London provided her with a sense of belonging, enabling her to navigate her BI in a safe space, free from judgment. These narratives exemplify how relocation can unlock new perspectives on BI, fostering a deeper understanding of self in response to evolving social landscapes (Sussman et al., 2007). Through these transformative experiences, participants embarked on a journey toward an authentic self, reshaping their BI into a more holistic view that integrates both their past and present experiences (Wingood et al., 2002). This exploration underscores the potential for personal growth and authenticity that emerges from engaging with new cultures, leading to a richer, more inclusive understanding of self and body.

Conversely, some participants experienced confusion and uncertainty regarding their BI during their transition to new cultural contexts, a notion supported by Bakhshi (2011), Soh et al. (2006), and Sussman et al. (2007). For instance, Victoria faced significant weight gain and embarked on a dieting and self-discovery journey aimed at achieving balance in her life. However, she grappled with the internalised critical voice of her mother, which loomed over her like an omnipresent "Big Brother," complicating her path to self-acceptance. This experience resonates with objectification theory, highlighting how the internalisation of societal expectations and parental critiques can obstruct personal growth and self-acceptance. Similarly, Tamara's narrative illustrated a different struggle; her frequent trips to the gym were propelled by a desire to sculpt a body that conformed to both societal standards and her father's expectations. However, her genuine aspiration was to attain a slimmer physique through yoga while eschewing muscle-building exercises, revealing the tension between her personal desires, the external pressures of Western culture, and her father's voice. These

experiences confirm the findings of Swami et al. (2010), who discuss the intricate interplay of individual aspirations and societal expectations in the formation of BI, particularly in the context of cultural change. The narratives reveal the diverse paths of adaptation, resistance, and conformity that women navigate as they integrate new cultural influences with their inherent sense of self. Notably, this research provides insights into the theme of the continuous quest for a holistic understanding of body and self during transitional periods, when women strive to harmonise personal authenticity with societal pressures. This process weaves together a more integrated and genuine narrative of self and BI, revealing the ongoing negotiation between identity and cultural expectations.

5.3 Critical Evaluation of Research

5.3.1 Quality of Research

To ensure adherence to research principles of quality, I applied Yardley's (2017) four principles throughout the study, which will be reflected upon to demonstrate the commitment to high-quality research. These principles include 'Commitment and Rigour,' 'Transparency and Coherence,' 'Sensitivity to Context,' and 'Importance and Impact.'

Commitment and rigour are demonstrated through deep engagement with the research field, the selected research approach, meticulous information gathering, and a comprehensive analytical framework. I maintained commitment and rigour by meticulously designing the study and selecting DPNA to ensure methodological thoroughness, which facilitated a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences. This approach allowed me to delve deeply into the nuanced stories shared by the women. In the study design, I crafted interview questions that were designed to be open-ended, enabling participants to provide thoughtful descriptions of their experiences with BI, yielding rich narratives that illuminated the multifaceted interaction of social, familial, and cultural personal factors influencing BI (Riessman, 2008).

I ensured rigour by consistently attending supervision sessions with my Director of Studies, which provided vital opportunities to gain perspective, especially during the analysis phase. Recognising the complexity of the data, I extended the analysis phase by four months, allowing for a more thorough examination rather than rushing through it. This decision enhanced my understanding of the narratives and helped identify personal biases that could

influence the data. I engaged deeply with the narratives to better comprehend how this research could inform the ethos and practice of CoP, which I discuss further below. Furthermore, maintaining a reflective diary throughout the research promoted transparency by allowing me to evaluate my motivations and experiences underpinning the study. As someone who experienced BI issues during my younger years, I remained attentive to my emotions while conducting the research. To safeguard my wellbeing, I regularly engaged in personal therapy and reflected on my feelings, fostering deeper self-awareness and resilience throughout the research process.

To enhance transparency, I utilised multiple analytical perspectives to cross-verify my findings. I examined the purpose of the narratives, the content and style of expressions, the positioning of participants, and potential external influences that may have shaped their stories. This comprehensive approach strengthened my interpretations and established consistency and reliability in my findings, demonstrating my active commitment to the study (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, coherence was achieved by effectively aligning theoretical and methodological frameworks. I selected theories that complemented the narrative approach, facilitating profound exploration of participants' stories and the meanings they assigned to their experiences. This methodological choice enabled an analysis that honoured the complexity and fluidity of the narratives, ensuring that theoretical underpinnings guided my inquiry and interpretation.

I demonstrated sensitivity to context by being acutely aware of the participants' socio-cultural backgrounds and perspectives. My position as an insider further ensured this sensitivity, as sharing a similar socio-cultural background allowed me to recognise the nuances influencing their narratives. This insider perspective enabled me to engage with the participants' stories with informed empathy, enhancing the interpretation of their experiences. By understanding cultural and societal influences firsthand, I was better equipped to appreciate the unique challenges and perspectives the participants brought to the study, enriching the overall analysis and findings (Yardley, 2000).

In recognising that DPNA does not prescribe strict rules, I maintained consistency and rigour by adhering to common principles of the approach while allowing for the openness and discovery of participant narratives within a structured framework. Committed to the idea that qualitative analysis should avoid imposing rigid categories on data, I focused on

understanding the meanings emerging from participant interactions (Yardley, 2000). By thoroughly exploring the literature and reflecting on my personal, professional, and academic philosophical positions, I became aware of the diverse socio-cultural contexts of participants, which helped me maintain sensitivity throughout the study. Reflexive practice was essential in maintaining sensitivity; sharing identities with participants as a researcher required additional measures to ensure rigour and to avoid overlooking certain nuances in my connection with them. These steps bolster the study's rigour and contribute to the strengths detailed in the upcoming sections

5.3.2 Research Strengths

By conducting this research, I aimed to make a meaningful contribution to the existing literature on BI, specifically related to middle-adult women from Eastern Europe living in London. My research demonstrated that this demographic has been largely overlooked in academic discussions (Cash, 2004; Inglehart, 2006). Current findings not only expand the body of literature but also provides a platform for the voices of women who are underrepresented in BI studies and psychological research in general. By addressing this gap, the study emphasises the need for inclusivity in research, encouraging future investigations to consider the diverse narratives of EE women, fostering an understanding of their unique circumstances and intersectional identities.

An additional advantage of the study is its application of DPNA, which enabled a thorough examination of participants' narratives (Riessman, 2008). This approach enhanced the quality and robustness of the data gathered, facilitated deep understanding of the complex interactions between social, cultural and personal factors influencing BI perceptions within this group. By using DPNA, I was able to highlight the individual stories of participants and the meanings they attach to their experiences, along with the interplay of factors that shape their stories.

Another strength of the study lies in my role as an insider within the research setting. Sharing a similar cultural background with the participants allowed me to engage more authentically with their narratives and build rapport, which could lead to a deeper level of trust and openness during the interview process (Gair, 2012). This insider perspective not only enhanced the quality of the data gathered but also facilitated a more empathetic

comprehension of the participants' experiences, facilitating more nuanced interpretations of their narratives.

Additionally, the use of photographs added strength to this research. Incorporating images allowed participants to express their feelings and perceptions about their bodies in a more tangible and impactful way (Robinson, 2002). Visual aid helped to evoke emotions and prompt deeper reflections (Robinson, 2002), enriching the data collected and providing a multidimensional perspective on BI. This approach complemented the narrative analysis by facilitating discussions that delve into the meanings behind the images, further illuminating the participants' experiences and insights.

5.3.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While my insider status enhanced the depth and authenticity of the data, it also posed potential constraints in analysis and interpretation. Familiarity with cultural norms and shared experiences could lead to assumptions or biases that affect how participants' stories are perceived (Gair, 2012). This perspective might also overlook subtleties that an outsider would explore more deeply. To mitigate these limitations, I employed reflective practices, such as maintaining a self-reflective diary and seeking supervisory consultations, to balance empathy with analytical rigour, ensuring interpretations were grounded in participants' narratives rather than solely in my perceptions (Gair, 2012).

In this study, DPNA was utilised to highlight the richness and depth of individual narratives rather than pursuing generalisability. This methodological choice emphasises the importance of thoroughly exploring participants' stories, which can be effectively achieved even with a small number of participants. The study involved five participants, reflecting an average sample size for such research (Wells, 2011). However, practical constraints, such as word count limitations, resulted in some narratives and their visual elements not being fully included in the analysis and results chapter. This constraint presents a chance for future studies to emphasise smaller sample sizes, allowing for deeper engagement with each narrative and capturing the complexity intrinsic to individual stories, thereby providing a clearer depiction of the concept of multivoicedness.

It is important to note that this research was not aimed at capturing the entire range of experiences of EE women. Rather, countries were selected based on their historical influence

under the post-communist USSR regime, with the aim of providing insight into the BI challenges faced by women from these regions, who are underrepresented in Western psychological research. Building on these findings, future research on EE women could benefit from examining BI within specific cultural groups, such as Lithuanian, Ukrainian, or Moldovan communities. Subsequently, conducting comparative studies could explore BI perceptions across different parts of Eastern Europe. This approach may uncover unique cultural attributes inherent to specific EE cultural backgrounds, thereby broadening insights into regional influences on BI perceptions.

Another potential limitation of this research: its focus on a specific intersection of identities unique to EE women in their 30s living in London. Considering the values of EE women are often rooted in traditional family and relationships (Bilukha & Utermohlen, 2002), the study may overlook experiences of other groups within this demographic. For example, differences between women with children and those without, or between single women in their 30s and those in relationships, women living outside of London. Future research could explore how these varied experiences and intersecting identities affect females' BI leading to more inclusive research and personalised interventions in practice that better support EE women's mental health.

A potential limitation of this study lies in the contextually sensitive nature of BI discussions, which might invoke feelings of vulnerability. The clinical setting may have restricted participants from expressing the full spectrum of their feelings and experiences. Given that BI is situational and ever-evolving (Orbach, 2019), another limitation is the short duration of data collection, which may not fully capture the complexities of participants' BI. Future research might benefit from multiple data collection sessions or incorporating BI diaries to better understand these evolving narratives. While the visual aid of photographs helped some participants reflect on their bodies retrospectively, it may have felt too personal for others to share these images with the interviewer. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how BI perceptions change over time, especially as participants navigate different life stages or adapt to new cultural contexts.

Finally, participants were not given the opportunity to provide input after the interviews, such as reviewing transcripts or engaging with the data and interpretations, to strengthen the co-construction of their narratives (Harvey, 2015). This was not possible due

to limited time. Greater collaboration would have better aligned with the social justice values inherent in CoP, adding an ethical dimension to the research process (Vanclay et al., 2013).

5.4 Research Implications

The theoretical foundation of this study suggests that the understanding of BI is collaboratively constructed, thus rendering it context-specific and inherently incomplete (Blood, 2004). As participants interact with and reflect on their stories, they may further refine and transform their perceptions of BI and their sense of self (McNamee & Gergen, 1992), making the conclusions drawn from this study provisional. It is expected that the insights derived from these unique experiences will foster broader reflection, dialogue, and contributions to clinical practice, services, and the field of CoP.

This study contributes to the limited body of research on BI among middle-adult EE women, emphasising the necessity for more culturally diverse investigations. It highlights the critical importance of considering intersecting identities such as age, cultural background socioeconomic status in analysing BI perceptions. This focus ensures a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping BI and identity. Moreover, the study underscores the value of employing DPNA in research on BI to capture the depth and complexity of individual narratives, advocating for the integration of narrative methodologies into psychological research. By doing so, it encourages a shift towards more qualitative, participant-centred approaches that honour the lived experiences of individuals. Finally, this research demonstrates the advantages of incorporating narrative and visual methods to examine complex BI issues. These methodologies not only enrich the data but also provide a multi-faceted perspective on how different identities and experiences shape BI perceptions. This approach suggests that researchers should consider similar methods when exploring BI among other demographic groups, thereby expanding the inclusivity and applicability of their findings across diverse populations.

5.5 Implications for Clinical Practice

When working with EE females in the UK, it is essential for clinicians to recognise each individual's cultural background and understand how EE cultural values may shape their perceptions of BI. Developing cultural awareness is crucial, as values such as those related to patriarchy can influence BI perceptions in varied ways. For some individuals, patriarchal

values may contribute to negative BI by imposing restrictive standards or pressures (Rieves & Cash, 1996). However, for others, these same values may provide a sense of stability, identity, or familial support, which can be integral to their self-worth and overall well-being. Given these differences, clinicians should approach each client with sensitivity to these potential meanings, exploring patriarchal influences without making assumptions about their impact. Clinicians should work collaboratively with clients to critically examine and, when appropriate, challenge patriarchal beliefs that may contribute to negative body perceptions. At the same time, clinicians should allow clients to remain true to the aspects of their cultural identity that they find supportive, ensuring that therapy does not inadvertently create a sense of ”otherness” or disconnection from their cultural roots (Strong & Zeman, 2005). By understanding how patriarchal values and other cultural factors may variably affect BI perceptions, clinicians can support clients in navigating their experiences in a way that promotes both cultural integrity and adaptive self-concept.

Awareness of acculturation processes, particularly regarding BI, is crucial for psychologists, counsellors, and social workers working with EE women in the UK. Understanding the nuances of acculturation helps these professionals grasp how adapting to a new culture affects identity and perception of BI (Cheney, 2010). Clinicians could enhance their support by applying culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches that integrate understanding of EE cultural identities. In practice, they might utilise culturally tailored interventions that recognise the traditional values surrounding family and community typical in EE cultures. This may involve using narrative therapy techniques to allow clients to share their stories about navigating their cultural identities in a Western context helping clients explore and reconstruct their BI identities while acknowledging their cultural backgrounds, fostering a cohesive self-concept (Wright et al., 2020).

Establishing support groups for EE women would be beneficial, providing shared spaces for open discussions about sensitive topics such as BI and fostering a sense of community. Research shows that support groups can effectively provide emotional support and improve psychological well-being by enabling individuals to share experiences and validate each other’s struggles, enhancing resilience and coping strategies (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Creating these groups could bridge cultural gaps and offer a supportive network that respects diverse perspectives, mitigating feelings of isolation associated with acculturation.

This would aid individual adaptation and enrich the cultural competency of therapeutic practices, leading to more effective and empathetic support for EE women in the UK.

Applying the principles of DPNA in clinical practice could encourage EE women to share their BI narratives, strengthen their sense of self, and empower them to negotiate BI ideals while resisting harmful societal influences. Clinicians could gain deeper insights into the subjective and contextual nature of BI experiences, supporting clients in authoring personal stories and fostering resilience and a sense of control over their BI (Duba et al., 2010). By promoting dialogical thinking (unpacking both their internal and external dialogues around BI), clinicians could help clients facilitate self-reflective conversations that present alternative perspectives on BI, navigate BI issues, leverage their strengths, and envision future directions for their evolving BI narratives (Frank, 2012). This approach ensures that therapeutic work progresses cautiously, avoiding the reinforcement of limiting narratives (Duba et al., 2010).

5.6 Implications for Services

Research findings highlight the significance of establishing safe environments for EE women to narrate their BI stories at their own pace (Duba et al., 2010). These services should prioritise environments that take into account broader socio-cultural factors alongside traditional diagnoses. While diagnostic criteria remain essential in NHS settings, integrating personal stories and socio-cultural contexts will enhance the holistic and individualised nature of care, aligning with a humanistic, person-centred therapeutic philosophy (Cooper, 2009). To further this aim, services should implement narrative-based interventions, such as storytelling workshops or narrative therapy, which empower individuals to reframe their personal narratives and foster a positive BI in relation to their unique cultural experiences. Such activities promote self-expression, helping women gain control over their BI, validate their stories, and strengthen their sense of identity and belonging (Hawke et al., 2023). By tailoring these services to meet the specific cultural needs of EE women, services can develop a more inclusive and responsive support framework that recognises and values the diverse identities within this population

To effectively translate this understanding into practice, services addressing BI distress must be developed with a deep awareness of women's cultural backgrounds. This

requires comprehensive staff training on cultural nuances and diverse perceptions of BI, which is essential for ensuring sensitivity and appropriateness in service delivery. Furthermore, training should specifically tackle biases against EE women and the discrimination they may encounter when seeking help. Challenges such as language barriers and cultural misunderstandings are particularly pronounced within NHS services, especially given the limited availability of qualified interpreters and the additional resources required for effective communication (Costa & Dewaele, 2019). To mitigate these challenges, services should focus on increasing the recruitment and training of bilingual staff, developing partnerships with language services, and implementing translation technology to facilitate more effective communication (Costa & Dewaele, 2019).

Engaging with EE communities is crucial for connecting service providers with individuals facing BI concerns and addressing their unique challenges. This engagement raises awareness of available resources, enhancing service uptake and effectiveness, and fosters culturally responsive care while building trust within the community (Attree et al., 2011). In addition, establishing peer support programmes that connect EE women with others who have experienced similar processes of relocation and adaptation creates a platform for shared narratives and collective empowerment. Such initiatives have been shown to enhance resilience and facilitate community building, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020).

Continuously evaluating and researching the effectiveness of interventions is crucial to ensure they meet the needs of EE women. Incorporating feedback mechanisms into service delivery helps refine programmes, ensuring they remain relevant and effective. Finally, integrating physical health support with social services will create a more holistic approach to addressing BI concerns, emphasising the interplay between psychological, social, and cultural factors.

5.7 Implications for CoP

CoP, as outlined by Cooper (2009), promotes holistic perspectives, strengths, resilience, culturally competent practice, and social justice. It stresses the importance of understanding individuals through emotional, social, cultural, and psychological lenses (Rafalin, 2010). The study of BI among EE women in their 30s, viewed through the lens of

DPNA, aligns with CoP's values by providing a contextualised understanding of how BI intertwines with personal narratives and life experiences. By exploring the embodied and narrative experiences of EE women, Counselling Psychologists can better tailor interventions that address culturally embedded expressions of BID and body-related mental health difficulties, including depression, generalised anxiety, social anxiety, eating disorders, and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), shaped by cultural, social, and gendered discourses. These issues are highly relevant to CoP and therapeutic work, offering insights into the sociocultural factors influencing clients' psychological distress and highlighting the need for culturally responsive practice.

This study shows how internalised patriarchal beauty ideals, rooted in EE traditions, intersect with Western neoliberal standards that valorise appearance, self-discipline, and self-optimisation (Chowdhury, 2022; Coffey, 2024). These conflicting cultural narratives contribute to internal dissonance, often manifesting as chronic BID, identity fragmentation, and increased vulnerability to psychological distress, especially when physical appearance is central to self-worth and social value. By exploring personal narratives, this study highlights not only the challenges faced by women but also the strengths and coping mechanisms they employ to manage difficulties related to BI and identity. For example, women expressed how integrating mindfulness-based techniques offered a powerful way for clients to reconnect with their bodies through non-judgemental, embodied awareness, thus disrupting the habitual self-surveillance and harsh self-critique that often accompany BID (Piran, 2016). Practical interventions as shared by participants, might include guided body scans, breath-work or mindful movement (e.g. yoga, walking meditation, archery) that invite women to experience their bodies from within rather than through the critical, objectifying gaze shaped by cultural ideals. Such practices can be especially healing for those who have come to view their bodies primarily through the lens of social scrutiny and aesthetic judgment. This aligns with CoP's strength-based approach, empowering Counselling Psychologists to foster resilience in their clients and encouraging them to harness their strengths during the therapeutic process, with a focus on individualised approaches rather than pathology (Steffen et al., 2015).

A significant contribution of the study on EE women is the contextualised insight it provides, which can help Counselling Psychologists develop culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches that align with CoP's core value of respecting diversity and tailoring interventions

to clients' cultural backgrounds and identities (Whaley, 2008). By incorporating DPNA, which views researcher reflexivity as integral, this study promotes continuous reflexivity that contributes to the field by moving beyond cultural competence toward cultural humility, which can be understood as a continuous process of introspection and critical reflection, addressing power dynamics, and fostering collaborative, equitable relationships with communities that avoid paternalism (Mosher et al., 2017). This concept connects to narrative humility, encouraging clinicians, teams, and researchers to remain curious about the individuals they work with, while honouring CoP's person-centred and humanistic values (BPS, 2018). A deeper appreciation of cultural heritage, migratory history, and identity dislocation equips practitioners to more meaningfully validate and address the complex identity conflicts that EE women may bring into therapy (Chowdhury, 2022). For instance, the study showed how clients may feel caught between conflicting expectations such as traditional EE norms prioritising femininity, modesty, or family-centred roles, and UK norms that emphasise autonomy, assertiveness, and appearance-based success. Therapists attuned to these tensions can help clients explore the emotional impact of cultural incongruence, support bicultural identity integration, and affirm the value of clients' unique cultural backgrounds. Additionally, understanding how loss of social status or support networks during migration may amplify body concerns allows therapists to contextualise symptoms rather than pathologise them.

Moreover, this research can empower Counselling Psychologists to identify systemic and societal factors affecting BI among EE women, such as patriarchy and social media influences specific to EE countries and their cultural heritage. This awareness equips therapists to advocate for broader societal changes and support their clients in overcoming external pressures and discrimination related to BI. Finally, the use of DPNA analysis can provide insights into individual growth, life transitions, and identity formation, which psychologists can leverage to help women overcome negative BI perceptions and facilitate personal development and self-acceptance. Narrative therapeutic approaches can support clients in externalising culturally shaped body-related beliefs and re-authoring their stories in ways that foster agency, coherence, and self-compassion (Frank, 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013). For example, EE women may carry internalised narratives such as "I must be thin and polished to be worthy," stemming from both traditional gender expectations in their country

of origin and Western beauty standards encountered in the UK. Narrative therapy can help clients identify these inherited scripts, separate them from their core identity, and co-construct alternative, empowering narratives, for instance, re-framing appearance as only one aspect of self-worth or highlighting personal resilience in navigating migration and adaptation. It underscores the significance of establishing safe therapeutic environments where EE women can openly reflect on their BI narratives without fear of judgment or cultural dismissal. It supports the development of more inclusive theoretical frameworks within CoP, ones that attend to the interplay of power, culture, and identity in shaping psychological experiences.

In sum, this study advances CoP by illustrating how cultural narratives, migration, and gendered beauty ideals shape BI distress, and by advocating for inclusive, reflexive, and contextually responsive therapeutic practices. Furthermore, it contributes to the limited literature on BI among EE women, providing insights that inform both clinical practice and future research. Overall, these insights demonstrate the leadership and proactive role that CoP can play in addressing BI issues and promoting systemic change, serving as guidelines for services and clinicians on how to work collaboratively with EE women to facilitate such change.

5.8 Concluding Remarks

The goal of this study was to explore the lifelong BI stories of EE females in their 30s living in London. Five participants shared their experiences through in-person interviews conducted in a clinical room at a charity organisation. The interviews, which followed an open format with some prepared prompts, allowed participants to narrate their stories authentically. Following analysis, each story was documented individually. The findings reveal that EE women carry complex, evolving BI narratives affected by a spectrum of personal social, and cultural elements, including personal agency and resistance to social and patriarchal pressures. Through these narratives, the women construct their unique perceptions of BI, moving toward a holistic, self-determined understanding of their bodies. This study offers important contributions to the field of CoP, particularly in addressing the culturally nuanced experiences of BI distress among EE women living in the UK. Through the use of DPNA, the research illuminates how participants navigate the complexities of conflicting

beauty ideals, identity negotiations, and sociocultural pressures, all of which shape their embodied experiences and psychological well-being. The findings have meaningful implications for clinicians, service providers, and counselling psychologists.

In concluding this research, I wish to emphasise that its purpose was not to offer a conclusive ”statement” on BI among EE women but rather to open up dialogue and invite ongoing exploration of the nuanced challenges they face as they navigate and re-author their lifelong BI narratives. This process has provided me with valuable learning experiences, stimulating meaningful discussions, and I aspire for readers to approach this research with fresh perspectives and critical insight. By adopting a social constructions lens, I aim for this work to underscore the importance of understanding BI as layered and dynamic, shaped by the intersections of culture, society, age relocation, family and mental health. I also hope this research inspires further inquiry and discussion around the mental health implications of BI, encouraging new perspectives that may have yet to be explored.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Research Recruitment Poster

Psychological Research Study Volunteers needed!!!

"The Story of My Body"

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a psychological research study about body image.
This study focuses on body image among Eastern European females who currently live in the UK.

Please participate in my study if you:

- Are in your 30s
- Are from Belarus, Latvia, Moldova or Ukraine
- Currently live in the UK
- Have moved to the UK at the age of 17 or later
- Have lived in the UK for at least 4 years
- Are able to speak about your body image in English

Your participation will be reimbursed with a £10 voucher from Amazon.

Your help is greatly appreciated!

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

"Story of My Body – Lifelong Body Image Narratives Among Eastern European Females in Their 30s"

Anzhelika Grechnaya: [redacted]
Email: u2182720@uel.ac.uk

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part or not, please carefully read through the following information which outlines what your participation would involve. Feel free to talk with others about the study (e.g., friends, family, etc.) before making your decision. If anything is unclear or you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on the above email.

Who am I?

My name is Anzhelika Grechnaya. I am a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology at the University of East London (UEL) and am studying for a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. As part of my studies, I am conducting the research that you are being invited to participate in.

What is the purpose of the research?

I am conducting research into understanding the body image among Eastern European females in their 30s. I aim to understand how Eastern European women living in the UK speak about their bodies and navigate their body image when facing a new culture? I hope to increase the awareness of body image among different populations and potentially contribute to culturally adopted therapy for body image dissatisfaction and enrich the field of Counselling Psychology.

Why have I been invited to take part?

To address the study aims, I am to invite Eastern European females residing in the UK to take part in my research. If you are from Latvia, Moldova, Belarus or Ukraine, in your 30s, and you have been residing in the UK for at least 4 years and you are fluent in English, you are eligible to take part in the study. It is also important that you moved to the UK after the age of 17.

It is entirely up to you whether you take part or not, participation is voluntary.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to take part?
If you agree to take part, you will be asked to come to the Stress Project Therapy Clinic for the interview about your body image story. I would also ask you to bring around 5 photographs to help with the story about your body. The interview will last from 45 to 90 minutes. The interview will take place at the Stress Project building at 2 Shelburne Rd, London N7 6DL.

The interview is an informal discussion about your memories and experience with your body image back home where you lived up in your childhood (at least until the age of 17) and when you moved to the UK. The interview will be audio recorded using a voice recorder. Your participation will be reimbursed by an amazon voucher of £10.

Can I change my mind?
Yes, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw without explanation, disadvantage or consequence. If you would like to withdraw from the interview, you can do so by emailing the researcher at u2182720@uel.ac.uk. If you withdraw, your data will not be used as part of the research.

Separately, you can also request to withdraw your data from being used even after you have taken part in the study, provided that this request is made within 3 weeks of the data being collected (after which point the data analysis will begin, and withdrawal will not be possible).

Are there any disadvantages to taking part?
To reduce any distress during the interview, you won't be asked any direct questions and can choose what they want to talk about. If you feel distressed by the interview, the recoding will be immediately stopped and you will be asked to take a break or discontinue the interview if the distress continues.

If you feel distressed you may want to contact one of the following organisations:

- MIND (www.mind.org.uk) provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing mental health problems. Telephone: 0300 123 3393. Monday to Friday 9am- 6pm.

- Samaritans (www.samaritans.org) offer a 24-hour helpline staffed by trained volunteers who will listen sympathetically. Telephone 0845 909090.
- Beat Eating Disorders (B-EAT) is a UKs eating disorder charity. (www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk) B-EAT offers a helpline 365 days a year and a webchat. Telephone 0808 801 0677

How will the information I provide be kept secure and confidential?

- Participants will not be identified by the data collected, on any material resulting from the data collected, or in any write-up of the research. All the personal information will be anonymised, pseudomised or removed if necessary.
- All the communications will be done via UEL e-mail on Outlook.
- Any personal information such as contact details will be kept on UEL OneDrive and destroyed after 3 weeks from the interview day.
- The information collected will be stored on UEL OneDrive with controlled access by the researcher only.
- Raw data will only be accessible by a researcher and anonymised data will be partly accessible by a researcher's supervisor and examiners.
- All the personal information will be anonymised and altered or removed if necessary.
- Once the data is collected, the audio recording and contact details will be destroyed within 3 weeks and the anonymised data (transcripts) will be kept for 3 years.

For the purposes of data protection, the University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University processes this information under the 'public task' condition contained in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Where the University processes particularly sensitive data (known as 'special category data' in the GDPR), it does so because the processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information about how the University processes personal data please see www.uel.ac.uk/about/about-uel/governance/information-assurance/data-protection

What will happen to the results of the research?

The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publicly available on UEL's online Repository - Registry of Open Access Repositories. Findings will also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks and articles. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally, personally identifying information will either be removed or altered to protect participant's anonymity and confidentiality.

Anonymised research data will be securely stored by Hannah Seal for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted.

Who has reviewed the research?

My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Ethics Committee. This means that the Committee's evaluation of this ethics application has been guided by the standards of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Anzhelika Grechnaya. Email: u2182720@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact my research supervisor Dr Hannah Sela. School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,

Email: H.Sela@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.

(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet

Appendix 3: Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

"Story of My Body – Lifelong Body Image Narratives Among Eastern European Females in Their 30s"

Contact person: Anzhelika Grechnaya
Email: u2182720@uel.ac.uk

	Please initial
I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet dated XX/XX/ XXXX for the above study and that I have been given a copy to keep.	
I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time, without explanation or disadvantage.	
I understand that if I withdraw during the study, my data will not be used.	
I understand that I have 3 weeks from the date of the interview to withdraw my data from the study.	
I understand that the interview will be recorded using the voice recorder.	
I understand that my personal information and data, including video recordings from the research will be securely stored and remain confidential. Only the research team will have access to this information, to which I give my permission.	

It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the research has been completed.	
I understand that short, anonymised quotes from my interview may be used in material such as conference presentations, reports, articles in academic journals resulting from the study and that these will not personally identify me.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Participant's Signature

.....

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)
ANZHELIKA GRECHNAYA
.....

Researcher's Signature 

.....
Date

.....

Appendix 4: Interview Schedule

Interview Guide for the Study

1. What interested you to participate in my study?
2. How did your family talk about the theme of body image, body shape? Were these themes present in your family ?
3. How did you feel about your body when you were a child/teenager/adult?
4. If your body could speak, what would it say when you lived in your home country and now?
5. How do you feel about your body now ?
6. What parts of your body did you like/dislike in the past?
7. What parts of your body do you like/dislike now ?
8. What were your parents' attitudes to body, sport, eating habits when you were a child/ teenager and now?
9. What were the cultural attitudes to body, sport and eating habits in your home country and how do they differ from the UK ?
10. Do you feel any pressure to appear a certain way by family, EE culture, Western culture?
11. What were the trends among your peers related to body shape, sport and eating habits?
12. What values do you recognise in your body? What does your body mean to you?
13. Have you ever felt like you want to change your body? How well do you accept/not accept your body?
14. How do you feel social media impacted / impacts your relationship to your body?
15. Do you like the way you/your body work?
16. Do you feel your body is a reflection of who you are?

Appendix 5: Debrief Letter

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF SHEET

"Story of My Body – Lifelong Body Image Narratives Among Eastern European Females in Their 30s"

Thank you for participating in my research study on body image among Eastern European females in their 30s. This document offers information that may be relevant in light of you having now taken part.

How will my data be managed?
The University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. More detailed information is available in the Participant Information Sheet, which you received when you agreed to take part in the research.

What will happen to the results of the research?
The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publicly available on UEL's online Repository. Findings will also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks and articles. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally, personally identifying information will either be removed or altered.

Anonymised research data will be securely stored by my research supervisor, Dr Hannah Sela for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted.

What if I been adversely affected by taking part?
It is not anticipated that you will have been adversely affected by taking part in the research, and all reasonable steps have been taken to minimise distress or harm of any kind.

Nevertheless, it is possible that your participation – or its after-effects – may have been challenging, distressing or uncomfortable in some way. If you have been affected in any of those ways, you may find the following resources/services helpful in relation to obtaining information and support:

- MIND (www.mind.org.uk) provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing mental health problems. Telephone: 0300 123 3393. Monday to Friday 9am- 6pm.
- Samaritans (www.samaritans.org) offer a 24-hour helpline staffed by trained volunteers who will listen sympathetically. Telephone 0845 909090.
- Beat Eating Disorders (B-EAT) is a UKs eating disorder charity (www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk). B-EAT offers a helpline 365 days a year and a webchat. Telephone 0808 801 0677

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Contact person: Anzhelika Grechnaya
Email: u2182720@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact my research supervisor Hannah Sela. School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
Email: H.Sela@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking part in my study

Appendix 6: Examples of Analysis Process (the "What")

A: Alla **What:** A reflects on how her involvement in sports and physical activities was influenced by gender stereotypes. Athletic activities (running ands swimming) were considered more suitable for boys, while yoga and dance were encouraged for her femininity. A recounts how she adopted beliefs and attitudes from friends and family, such as avoiding swimming to prevent developing muscular arms, despite personally enjoying the activity and not being initially concerned about body image. A describes her grandmother's comments about appearance and diet. Although not malicious and motivated by love, these comments placed a value on physical appearance and contributed to her awareness and anxiety about her body. There is an acknowledgment that family remarks, even when not constant or overtly critical, can still influence self-perception and attitudes towards food and body image. A mentions comparing herself to others and feeling anxious about appearance, a common experience during adolescence that was exacerbated by familial comments. Specific cultural phrases (e.g., "muffin top") highlights how cultural context can shape the way body image issues are communicated and understood within families.	1 (A 4) Yeah. *(pauses)* Thinking about it now, it kind of 2 **reminds me that sport wasn't forced so much,** but **it was** **3 encouraged,** you know, so **I was always doing something.** 4 I was doing yoga. I was doing dances. You know, **I didn't** **5 like more athletic sports, but there was a reason for that**, 6 I think, *(voice softening)* because **I was supposed to be also** **7 feminine.** You know, I shouldn't. I shouldn't have… (*sighs*). **8 I wasn't encouraged to engage in running because it's** **9 more for guys.** You know, there was a lot of **gender** **10 stereotyping,** and I remember **my friend saying she** **11 stopped doing swimming because she didn't want to** **12 have big arms and big shoulders.** *(pauses)* 13 I remember **I didn't even think about it, but I started** **14 saying the same thing:** ***"I'm not doing swimming because*** 15 *I don't want big arms." (voice rising slightly)* **I didn't care** **16 about big arms, and I liked swimming, and I just** **17 adopted that.** I remember my **grandma saying, *"Don't*** **18 *eat too many sandwiches,"*** or like you have that phrase in 19 Russian. *(smiles/laughs)* It's a very funny phrase; it's like, I 20 don't know if you know it. It wasn't my grandma's phrase. 21 So it's like this, you know, like the muffin top? Basically, 22 she would be like, yeah. She **wouldn't** *(pauses)* **23 say it in a shameful way, but there was always, like, a** **24 comment around it,** you know. And **it wasn't malicious** **25 because my grandma was literally like my light,** (*voice* 26 *softens)* you know, like, I loved her so much. She's 27 amazing, but I think **she wanted happiness for me, and** **28 for her,** *(drops voice, thoughtful)* **happiness for a woman** **29 was partially about how she looked.** So **she placed a lot** **30 of value into it,** and she would tell me, **"Do some** **31 exercises,** you know, like **do the leg raises,"** *(laughs* 32 *lightly, mimicking her grandma's tone)* "to **eliminate your** **33 muffin top**." Umm. *(pause, reflecting)* And then I would 34 be like, yeah. Like, I remember sharing that **I was a bit** **35 anxious about how I looked or something** (*voice quiets)* 36 maybe because of the phrases or another reason I was 37 comparing myself, and I was 14 or 13. **She would tell me,** **38 "Eat fewer sandwiches. You know, like, you eat too** **39 many sandwiches,"** or something, like when you're 40 watching films or something like that. And t**hat was a** **41 little bit of a dig, you know, towards food,** but it **wasn't** **42 constant enough or that present to affect me so much.** 43 *(pauses for emphasis)* I can see it affecting some other 44 people I know, *(nods, voice sympathetic)* like my sister. 45 My stepsister, I didn't grow up with her, so separate family. 46 But yeah, *(pause)* there were moments *(hint of nostalgia)*.	**Themes:** Encouragement vs. Pressure in Sports and Activities Gender Norms Impact of Peer Influence Cultural Expressions of Body Image Anxiety About Appearance Comparative Self-Perception Resilience and Coping

Appendix 7: Examples of Analysis Process (the "How")

K: Karina **How:** Conversational style that enhances the relatability of her reflections on body image and societal expectations. The flow is informal: the use of informal phrases. Karina's tone is reflective yet critical, showing appreciation for her mother's intentions while also voicing her frustrations. The words chosen are straightforward and accessible, employing colloquial language that mirrors everyday speech. Phrases like "At your age, I didn't look like this" convey both a generational comparison and a traditional view of beauty that reflects societal norms. The repetition of phrases such as "that's not good" reinforces the emotional weight of her mother's scrutiny, highlighting the tension between familial care and the pressure to meet beauty standards. Her remarks about her past discomfort and her current acceptance ("I didn't like it back then, but now I like it") underscore her growth and evolving perspective on BI. This indicates a complex relationship with her identity shaped by external commentary. The reference to her experiences in school, the anecdote about mascara and the teacher's reprimand, illustrates the restrictive environment surrounding beauty standards during her formative years.	1 (K 7) You know what? Because I'm coming from…and even now 2 *(pauses)* yes, **my mum is commenting on me.** 3 *(sighs lightly)* OK. **Every time I go to Riga, she looks at me and says,** 4 ***"Oh, you know what? That's not good.*** *(voice critical)* 5 *That's not good. You're too big,"* or ***"I didn't see you getting*** **6 *bigger,"*** *(voice rising)* telling me all these comments. Or like, ***"At your*** **7 *age, I didn't look like this."*** *(pauses, a hint of frustration)* But you 8 know, I didn't like it back then, but now I like it. *(voice softer)* **You** **9 know, she wants the best for me, to be honest**, *(pauses)* yeah. **She's** **10 honest, and she's very, very hard on me**. *(takes a deep breath)*. 11 Yeah, but when we were growing up, it was a time when everyone was 12 so, so busy, and we were raised *(voice gaining strength)* yes, of course, **13 as a lady,** I **wanted to look great in everything**. *(pauses)* But I 14 remember at school in Riga, *(pauses)* I was, you know, studying, and I 15 was in grade 9 or 8. So let's say I was 13 or 14 years old. In my school, 16 **which was the best school in central Riga**, the first gymnasium, as I 17 remember, one girl put on mascara, and the teacher, in front of 18 everyone, said to her, ***"What is this?"*** *(voice mimicking the teacher)* 19 So basically, **we were raised in a very, very different manner than** **20 my sister.** *(understanding)* She is seven years younger. 21 When she was in the same grade, she was also studying in the same 22 school, and **everyone was wearing mascara and everything.** So, you 23 know, **actually, it was good.** (*a hint of pride)* You know, like with 24 Natalia Vodianova, *(pauses)* she was saying she started to trim her 25 eyebrows, and her grandma came and said, ***"Don't do this."*** So 26 basically, **I didn't have a strict grandma like Natalia Vodianova**, 27 but at that time, you know, the eyebrows were very, very thin, and I 28 did trim them to be trendy because I didn't… I could have had 29 amazing eyebrows now. *(laughs softly)*.

Appendix 8: Analysis of Native Language Use and Its Meaning

How:	**A: Alla**
Alla discusses her mother's expectations and comments, referring to a "pampuschka," a term that means a cute, bubbly person not conforming strictly to a slender body type. Her mother's expectation that Alla would grow up "kind of like her" and uses the term "pampuschka". This creates a dual message: acceptance for who she is, yet also pressure to conform to a certain body type or appearance. Her mother's comments, while intended as affectionate and supportive, also bring an implicit pressure to not only meet but exceed physical expectations.	1 (A 3) Yeah. So there are a few things that come to mind. 2 *(pauses)* There is a kind of **unspoken thing where you can be** **3 whoever you want to be and look however you want to be.** 4 *(pauses lowers)* But then yet again, **it's nicer if you're a certain** **5 way,** *(voice lowers)* and it's almost like... *(reflecting)* I 6 remember my mum said once… **my mum's always been a bit** **7 of a bigger girl and a bigger woman,** *(pauses for emphasis)* so **8 she's never been skinny in a sense of more of like skinny,** you 9 know, **I don't know what is the norm anyway,** but she always 10 told me. **She always thought that I was going to be born** **11 and, like, be as a young girl kind of like her.** Like 12 "pampuschka." *(pauses)* I don't know. It's a Russian word. Like 13 it's a nice Russian word that expresses like you are not fat… 14 *(pauses, searching for words)* but it felt that **it has a lot of** **15 loaded meaning,** but it's kind of like a **cute, nice name.** But 16 you also imagine a **bubbly person when you hear that**… **It's** **17 cute, but I wasn't**… *(pauses)* And it was like, **Oh, that's a** **18 good thing**, because I expected you to be something... But you 19 were, like, **exceeding my expectations. It's a compliment,** **20 but also there is a little bit of pressure to maintain that** **21 maybe.** *(pauses, a hint of worry)* **But then also kind of makes** **22 me feel like I would be accepted anyway,** so it has a **dual** **23 message,** you know. So my mum would say that she imagined 24 me one way, *(pauses)* and I was born and I was like as a child, 25 quite skinny and bonnie…

Appendix 9: Examples of the Photograph Analysis Process

V: Victoria **Picture analysis**	1 (V 20) - So **I have a picture in my highest weight.** This 2 was in 2018. It was the **highest, highest weight.**
The picture: The picture reflected summer time where V was wearing a sleeveless long dress and sunglasses. She seemed to feel a mix of emotions, including vulnerability, discomfort, and possibly insecurity. Her body language reflected a closed off posture and she avoided direct eye contact. She spoke openly but softly choosing lacking expanding on the experience. There were moments of pausing as she recounted her experiences of her body image at that time. The long dress could symbolise a desire for coverage or comfort, while the sunglasses could be a shield to hide emotions or vulnerabilities. **What**: V's internal struggle with weight management and her attitudes towards comfort and self-image. V's awareness of the weight range in which she feels most comfortable and confident, noting that going above this weight limit makes her feel uncomfortable. However, she also mentions a reluctance to go below this weight limit as she tend to settle into a comfort zone and resist pushing herself further to reach a lower weight. **How**: the structure of the narrative follows a pattern of weight fluctuations that she has experienced. The narrative is focusing on the narrator's introspective observations about weight, comfort, and self-esteem. The flow of the story captures a series of personal reflections on weight fluctuations and the impact on the narrator's sense of comfort and well-being. **Purpose**: The purpose is to delve into the internal dialogue about weight, self-perception, and control. V aims to explore the complexities of body image, comfort, and self-control, showing her journey to maintain a healthy balance and control over their weight while navigating personal challenges and preferences. **Positioning**: first-person pronouns "I" and "me," providing an intimate look into personal experiences, thought processes, and emotional responses to weight changes. The internal dialogue emphasises individual's journey of self-discovery and self-management. **Voices**: The interaction of voices involves V's self-awareness, societal beauty standards, and personal struggles with food, comfort, and BI. The contrast between feeling comfortable at a specific weight but not allowing oneself to go beyond that threshold reflects the internal conflict between personal comfort and societal ideals. **Contradictions**: A contradiction in the statement about not allowing oneself to go beyond a certain weight despite comfort. A conflict between feeling comfortable at a specific weight but also seeking control and self-improvement presents a contradiction.	1 (V 21) You know, I remember. *(pauses)* You know, in 2 my head, **I always know how much I weigh** or **even I** **3 know how much I weigh by noticing how my clothes** **4 sit on me.** For me to look… *(emphasising)* to be 5 comfortable… **So if the weight is bigger, I don't feel** **6 comfortable.** *(conveying discomfort)* **But the problem** **7 is, I never go lower than this weight because I start** **8 feeling comfortable** at this weight, *(voice softening)* and **9 I don't allow myself**… *(sighs)* not allow as long I want 10 it, but I **never kind of make an extra step and just let** **11 it go.** Maybe you will enjoy it even more, you know. 12 And **I stopped halfway,** *(pauses)* and **I noticed I was** **13 slimming maybe 15 times**. *(voice rises in emphasis)* I 14 had these times **when I put on weight, lose weight,** **15 and I always stop at the same time.** Yeah…. So, 16 yeah, **when I put on weight, I feel uncomfortable,** of 17 course, because when you put on weight, *(pauses)* 18 firstly… **when I put on weight, of course, first the** **19 clothes are not comfortable. Even in the UK, it's** **20 quite comfortable in terms of clothing** sizes, and **you** **21 can buy any size, there's no issue.** *(pauses)* **This is** **22 the main difference between my country and the** **23 UK,** but regardless... *(voice trailing off)* **Even if you** **24 buy a big size, it doesn't look good to me.** 25 *(disappointment)* **You know, your face doesn't look** **26 good.** So I don't… *(pauses, voice firm)* **I wouldn't go** **27 back on a diet or on healthy eating or on exercise if I** **27 felt comfortable in my body weight.** So I didn't feel 28 comfortable. *(pauses for emphasis)* **But I like food a** **29 lot,** and **I was just losing control.** And **putting on** **30 quite a lot, and now I just can control it better.** So, **I** **31 don't go to this extreme.**.. *(pauses)* Plus 30 or minus 32 30, that's the main difference.

Appendix 10: Examples of Analysis Process (Positioning and Purpose)

T: Tamara **Positioning**: The use of second-person pronouns ("you") creates a sense of direct engagement with the audience/ researcher. This choice implies that T is inviting listeners to share in her reflection, creating a conversational and relatable dynamic. It encourages the audience to consider their own experiences regarding BI. By using "you," T suggests that her observations apply not just to herself but to a broader audience. This approach generalises the experience of young girls, implying that many might feel similarly when reflecting on their childhoods and the influence of peers on their development. T switches to first-person pronouns when she says, "I remember myself" and "that's I thought." This shift indicates a personal reflection on her own experiences and thoughts, which grounds her observations in her own journey through childhood and adolescence. It emphasises her agency and individual perspective as she recounts her growth. Using "I" highlights her subjective reflection on her identity formation, particularly as she transitions from childhood to adolescence. The narrative includes third-person pronouns when referring to "the girls" and "that girl." This use allows her to describe the behaviours and attributes of others without directly centring the narrative on herself. By analysing other girls' appearances and behaviours, T reflects the impact of external social pressures on her self-perception. The emphasis on looking at how "she looks and how she behaves" showcases the way social observation plays a central role in shaping one's identity, particularly during teenage years.	1 (T 16) - **As a child,** *(reflecting)* **you don't** **2 really think about or look at your body,** 3 *(pauses)* but you **usually look at the girls** **4 around you who get attention from** **5 people,** and **that's how your mind** **6 works.** So **when you see guys looking at** **7 that girl, you pay attention to how she** **8 looks and how she behaves,** and you **9 subconsciously want to become like her.** 10 I remember when I was not a child, but 11 more of a teenager, around 12 or 13 years 12 old. I **looked at how the girls appeared** **13 and what they dressed like,** *(pauses,* 14 *reflecting on the details)* and **I thought** **15 that I would like to be like them**, for 16 example. *(affirmatively)*	**Purpose:** The purpose of the narrative is to explore the evolution of self-perception from childhood innocence to adolescent awareness amidst societal pressures regarding BI. It highlights the impact of social dynamics, particularly peer influences, in shaping personal identity and aspirations. The narrative serves as both a personal reflection on T's experiences and a broader commentary on the societal expectations that contribute to BI issues among young girls.

Appendix 11: Examples of Analysis Process ("Voices")

D: Daria **Voices:** D's references "a few friends in England who actually like done surgery," which demonstrates peer influence/voices on her perceptions of surgery. When surgery is performed by friends, it can become normalised, making it appear less "super weird." The cultural voice represents societal norms and expectations regarding beauty standards and breast size and attractiveness indicating that cultural acceptance of cosmetic surgery plays a significant role in her thought process about body image. Discussing a friend who received breast augmentation funded by a wealthy partner further deepens this influence, suggesting that relationships and social circles can impact personal decisions regarding BI. The patriarchal voice is evident in the underlying societal belief that female's value is often tied to their look and sexual attractiveness. D reflects on concerns about whether she'll be found attractive by men, highlighting how patriarchal standards can create pressure for her to conform to certain beauty ideals regarding body shape and size. D's inner dialogue reveals her personal feelings and insecurities around BI "Maybe I should just do it if I feel insecure about it." This reflects a personal contemplation influenced by external voices, yet it also shows an awareness of her own self-worth. By asserting, "I don't really feel that insecure about it" and "I feel like I'm already good enough," she expresses a strong personal voice that counters societal pressures, showing an underlying narrative of self-acceptance and confidence despite contemplating surgery. The context of dating (e.g., having sex for the first time) illuminates insecurities tied to attractiveness and acceptance, indicating the voice of societal expectations regarding female desirability.	1 (D 18) Well, *(engaging)* **I would say breasts would** **2 definitely be a thing where you would think,** ***"Oh, maybe I*** ***3 should just get bigger breasts,"*** and **it's so cheap** to do 4 that… *(pauses, reflecting)* relatively cheap. You can also do 5 it not necessarily in the UK; **you can go to Colombia or** **6 wherever.** I have **a few friends in England who have** **7 actually done surgery,** so it doesn't feel like something 8 super weird. *(reassuringly)* Also, speaking of that, *(tone* 9 *shifting)* I have another friend back from Ukraine. *(pauses)* 10 We are not really in close contact at the moment, but she 11 used to…she went to a beauty competition, and **she was** **12 quite skinny and didn't have big breasts like I do,** **13 actually.** (gestures modestly to herself) But **then she met** **14 this quite rich man,** and **he paid for her boobs.** A few 15 friends from Ukraine also had some surgery. *(pauses,* 16 *contemplating)* So I was sort of thinking, *"Well, maybe I* *17 should just do it if I feel insecure about it." (sighs lightly,* 18 *voice lowering)* But at the end of the day, **I would** **19 probably just talk myself out of it** because **I don't really** **20 feel that insecure about it**. *(affirming self-assurance)* It's 21 maybe in certain contexts like **when you're having sex for** **22 the first time or something like that** *(voice trailing off,* 23 *hinting at vulnerability)* then you're like, "Oh, you know, 24 will he find me attractive?" But at the same time, *(pauses)* I 25 would still… **You'll be able to get pretty handsome guys,** **26 and nobody would really comment on this.** *(confident)* **27 And bear in mind, too, I have only dated European men.** 28 *(pauses)* So I know that's, you know, also relevant to your 29 study, but **nobody will ever comment on anything. I** **30 don't think I will put myself through something like** **31 going under the surgeon's knife just to look prettier** 32 because I feel like **I'm already good enough.** *(confidently,* 33 *self-acceptance)*.

Appendix 12: Ethical Approval

University of East London

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

School of Psychology Ethics Committee

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

For research involving human participants
BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

Reviewer: Please complete sections in blue | **Student:** Please complete/read sections in orange

Details	
Reviewer:	**Tom Kent**
Supervisor:	**Hannah Sela**
Student:	**Anzhelika Grechnaya**
Course:	**Professional Doctorate Counselling Psychology**
Title of proposed study:	**"Story of My Body – Lifelong Body Image Narratives Among Eastern European Females in Their 30s"**

Checklist (Optional)			
	YES	**NO**	**N/A**
Concerns regarding study aims (e.g., ethically/morally questionable, unsuitable topic area for level of study, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Detailed account of participants, including inclusion and exclusion criteria	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding participants/target sample	☐	☐	☐
Detailed account of recruitment strategy	☐	☐	☐

Concerns regarding recruitment strategy	☐	☐	☐
All relevant study materials attached (e.g., freely available questionnaires, interview schedules, tests, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Study materials (e.g., questionnaires, tests, etc.) are appropriate for target sample	☐	☐	☐
Clear and detailed outline of data collection	☐	☐	☐
Data collection appropriate for target sample	☐	☐	☐
If deception being used, rationale provided, and appropriate steps followed to communicate study aims at a later point	☐	☐	☐
If data collection is not anonymous, appropriate steps taken at later stages to ensure participant anonymity (e.g., data analysis, dissemination, etc.) – anonymisation, pseudonymisation	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding data storage (e.g., location, type of data,	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding data sharing (e.g., who will have access and	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding data retention (e.g., unspecified length of time, unclear why data will be retained/who will have access/	☐	☐	☐
If required, General Risk Assessment form attached	☐	☐	☐
Any physical/psychological risks/burdens to participants have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	☐	☐	☐
Any physical/psychological risks to the researcher have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	☐	☐	☐
If required, Country-Specific Risk Assessment form attached	☐	☐	☐
If required, a DBS or equivalent certificate number/information provided	☐	☐	☐
If required, permissions from recruiting organisations attached (e.g., school, charity organisation, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
All relevant information included in the participant information sheet (PIS)	☐	☐	☐
Information in the PIS is study specific	☐	☐	☐
Language used in the PIS is appropriate for the target audience	☐	☐	☐
All issues specific to the study are covered in the consent form	☐	☐	☐
Language used in the consent form is appropriate for the target audience	☐	☐	☐
All necessary information included in the participant debrief	☐	☐	☐
Language used in the debrief sheet is appropriate for the target audience	☐	☐	☐

Study advertisement included	☐	☐	☐
Content of study advertisement is appropriate (e.g., researcher's personal contact details are not shared, appropriate language/ visual material used, etc.)	☐	☐	☐

Decision options	
APPROVED	Ethics approval for the above-named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice), to the date it is submitted for assessment.
APPROVED - BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES	In this circumstance, the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made **before** the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box at the end of this form once all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to the supervisor. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records. **Minor amendments guidance:** typically involve clarifying/ amending information presented to participants (e.g., in the PIS, instructions), further detailing of how data will be securely handled/stored, and/or ensuring consistency in
NOT APPROVED - MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED	In this circumstance, a revised ethics application **must** be submitted and approved **before** any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application. **Major amendments guidance:** typically insufficient information has been provided, insufficient consideration given to several key aspects, there are serious concerns regarding any aspect of the project, and/or serious concerns in the candidate's ability to ethically, safely and sensitively

Decision on the above-named proposed research	
Please indicate the decision:	**APPROVED - MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES**

Minor amendments
Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

- Description of Involvement: The advertisement should clearly state that participants will be interviewed, and it should include your name and the name of your supervisor, along with a brief outline of who you are.

- Recruitment Strategy Backup: Additionally, please ensure there is a backup recruitment strategy. Currently, the main method is through social media including contacting organizations, but it is essential to have alternative avenues to reach potential participants.

- General Risk Assessment: In the risk assessment, apart from addressing the possibility of stopping or breaking the interview in case of any issues, please mention that emotional support helplines will be provided for participants if they need further assistance.

- Handling Photos: Regarding the use of photos, please make sure to include the following points:

  i) In the interview schedule, specify how the photos will be used and referred to during the study to ensure transparency and clear communication with participants.

  ii) In the Participant Information Sheet (PIS), clearly outline the confidentiality and usage of the photos. It should be made explicit to participants that the photos will only be used during the interview and that they can take the photos home afterwards. Additionally, assure them that the photos will not be used in any capacity beyond the interview except for verbal descriptions.

Major amendments

Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

Assessment of risk to researcher

Has an adequate risk assessment been	**YES** ☒	**NO** ☐

offered in the application form?	If no, please request resubmission with an **adequate risk assessment.**	
If the proposed research could expose the researcher to any kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard, please rate the degree of risk:		
HIGH	Please **do not approve a high-risk** application. Travel to countries/provinces/areas deemed to be high risk should not be permitted and an application not be approved on this basis. If unsure, please refer to the Chair of Ethics.	☐
MEDIUM	Approve but include appropriate recommendations in the below box.	☐
LOW	Approve and if necessary, include any recommendations in the below box.	☒
Reviewer recommendations in relation to risk (if any):	Please insert any recommendations	

Reviewer's signature	
Reviewer: (Typed name to act as signature)	**T.Kent**
Date:	**03/08/2023**
This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Ethics Committee	

RESEARCHER PLEASE NOTE

For the researcher and participants involved in the above-named study to be covered by UEL's Insurance, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

For a copy of UEL's Personal Accident & Travel Insurance Policy, please see the Ethics Folder in the Psychology Noticeboard.

Confirmation of minor amendments

(Student to complete)

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data	
Student name: (Typed name to act as signature)	**Anzhelika Grechnaya**
Student number:	**U2182720**
Date:	**09/08/2023**

Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed if minor amendments to your ethics application are required

Appendix 13: Data Management Plan

UEL Data Management Plan

Completed plans must be sent to researchdata@uel.ac.uk for review

If you are bidding for funding from an external body, complete the Data Management Plan required by the funder (if specified).

Research data is defined as information or material captured or created during the course of research, and which underpins, tests, or validates the content of the final research output. The nature of it can vary greatly according to discipline. It is often empirical or statistical, but also includes material such as drafts, prototypes, and multimedia objects that underpin creative or 'non-traditional' outputs. Research data is often digital, but includes a wide range of paper-based and other physical objects.

Administrative Data	
PI/Researcher	Anzhelika Grechnaya
PI/Researcher ID (e.g. ORCiD)	n/a
PI/Researcher email	u2182720@uel.ac.uk
Research Title	"Story of My Body – Lifelong Body Image Narratives Among Eastern European Females in Their 30s"
Project ID	
Research start date and duration	June 2023 - August 2024

Research Description	There is lack of understanding of body image (BI) construct among Eastern European females in their 30s living in the UK. These females seem to have conflicted and double beauty body standards due to the impact of their original culture and Western values of body and beauty. I aim at exploring how do Eastern European females construct their BI as impacted by both country of origin and the UK.
Funder	n/a
Grant Reference Number (Post-award)	n/a
Date of first version (of DMP)	05/06/2023
Date of last update (of DMP)	n/a
Related Policies	e.g. Research Data Management Policy
Does this research follow on from previous research? If so, provide details	n/a
Data Collection	
What data will you collect or create?	6-8 open lengthy interviews (45-90 minutes) which will be transcribed verbatim and analysed using Narrative Analysis. (Qualitative data). Interviews will contain data about personal body image experiences. I will not ask any specific personal information. Narrative Analysis assumes open interview. I will prepare some prompts to facilitate the discussion.

How will the data be collected or created?	Interviews will be conducted in person and audio recorded on a physical audio recorder. To facilitate data collection I will ask women to select and bring up to 5 photographs that would help them talking about their body image story through life. Once interviews are audio recorded, mp4 files will be exported from audio recorder to UEL OneDrive. Recordings will be stored following the file-naming convention: [ProjectCode]-[InterviewerInitials]-[ParticipantNumber]-[Location]-[Date].Ext An interview schedule (prompts) will be developed so that a standard format is followed. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.The transcriptions will be securely stored on UEL OneDrive.
Documentation and Metadata	
What documentation and metadata will accompany the data?	I will not use a formal disciplinary metadata standard but will prepare a file containing a template consent form, participant information sheets, debrief forms, interview schedule and advert for the research project. I will also securely store them on UEL OneDrive.
Ethics and Intellectual Property	
Identify any ethical issues and how these will be managed	The information will be collected in person and securely stored on UEL OneDrive with controlled access by a researcher only. All participants' responses will be anonymised and personal revealing informations will be pseudomised or removed in the transcript to ensure participants' confidentiality. I will also create a pseudonymised logbook/code book which will be deleted once the data is transcribed. I will ask participants to sign an informed consent form which will be emailed them before the interview where I will clarify their rights as participants and where and how long their information will be stored, as well as how it will be shared and archived in the future.

Identify any copyright and Intellectual Property Rights issues and how these will be managed	n/a
Storage and Backup	
How will the data be stored and backed up during the research?	Raw data will be securely stored on researcher's audio recorder and kept in the locked drawer for a period of data collection over summer 2-3 months (July, August, September). Audio recordings once exported to UEL OneDrive will be transcribed, anonymised and securely stored on UEL OneDrive. The audio recordings will be deleted from the audio recorder once the interviews are transcribed around September. The data will be backed up by UEL SharePoint.
How will you manage access and security?	The data will be stores on OneDrive, which is encrypted and accessed through multi-factor authentication. Accessed on a password protected device. Only researcher will have access to raw data (interview audio recordings, transcripts, consent forms). Supervisor and examiners will only access anonymised data using OneDrive secure links. The audio recorder will be securely stored in the locked drawer with the access of the researcher only. The data will be removed from the audio recorder once it is transcribed around the end of
Data Sharing	
How will you share the data?	Raw data won't be shared. The transcribed data will be shared with supervisors and examiners. The final thesis will be released for sharing on UEL Research Repository.
Are any restrictions on data sharing required?	n/a
Selection and Preservation	

Which data are of long-term value and should be retained, shared, and/or preserved?	Anonymised interview transcripts will be of a long-term value (3 years).
What is the long-term preservation plan for the data?	Raw data will be destroyed once the interviews are transcribed verbatim within 3 months over summer period. Anonymised interview transcripts will be stored on UEL OneDrive for 3 years.
Responsibilities and Resources	
Who will be responsible for data management?	The researcher will be responsible for data management.
What resources will you require to deliver your plan?	n/a
Review	
	Please send your plan to researchdata@uel.ac.uk **We will review within 5 working days and request further information or amendments as required before signing**
Date: 05/06/2023	Reviewer name: Joshua Fallon Assistant Librarian RDM

Guidance

Brief information to help answer each section is below. Aim to be specific and concise.

For assistance in writing your data management plan, or with research data management more generally, please contact: **researchdata@uel.ac.uk**

Administrative Data

Related Policies

List any other relevant funder, institutional, departmental or group policies on data management, data sharing and data security. Some of the information you give in the remainder of the DMP will be determined by the content of other policies. If so, point/link to them here.

Data collection

Describe the data aspects of your research, how you will capture/generate them, the file formats you are using and why. Mention your reasons for choosing particular data standards and approaches. Note the likely volume of data to be created.

Documentation and Metadata

What metadata will be created to describe the data? Consider what other documentation is needed to enable reuse. This may include information on the methodology used to collect the data, analytical and procedural information, definitions of variables, the format and file type of the data and software used to collect and/or process the data. How will this be captured and recorded?

Ethics and Intellectual Property

Detail any ethical and privacy issues, including the consent of participants. Explain the copyright/IPR and whether there are any data licensing issues – either for data you are reusing, or your data which you will make available to others.

Storage and Backup

Give a rough idea of data volume. Say where and on what media you will store data, and how they will be backed-up. Mention security measures to protect data which are sensitive or valuable. Who will have access to the data during the project and how will this be controlled?

Data Sharing

Note who would be interested in your data, and describe how you will make them available (with any restrictions). Detail any reasons not to share, as well as embargo periods or if you want time to exploit your data for publishing.

Selection and Preservation

Consider what data are worth selecting for long-term access and preservation. Say where you intend to deposit the data, such as in UEL's data repository (https://repository.uel.ac.uk) or a subject repository. How long should data be retained?