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An exploration of body image conceptualisation in young religious Jewish women: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Within the body of literature that exists regarding general body-image in women (Erguner-Tekinalp & Gillespie, 2010; Pelletier & Dion, 2007; Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes & Larose, 2011), there is a dearth of qualitative research that examines body-image and its contributing factors in Orthodox Jewish (known as 'Chareidi') women. In the present study, six young women who were reared within, and reside in Chareidi communities were interviewed in an attempt to gain insight into their thoughts and feelings about their bodies, with a focus on understanding the factors that have contributed to these feelings. Specifically the research sought to understand whether participants felt that their specific religious context affected their feelings about bodily appearance and bodily satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The sample was chosen due to their relative seclusion from western ideals and emphasis on external appearances, as well as their somewhat limited exposure to western media (Becker, Burwell, Herzog, Hamburg & Gilman, 2002). The results were very interesting in light of this relative seclusion; the data indicated a general theme of dissatisfaction regarding their bodily selves, be it facial features or body size, and a preoccupation with appearance that mirrors that of western culture. This unexpected finding led the researcher to critically examine the possible contributing factors, both internal (such as Kosher) and outside (such as peer pressure, familial pressure) of Jewish laws and values. The emergent themes were organised around these findings, with five primary themes emerging, namely attitude towards food; perceptions of bodily self; influence of peers; the secular world outside; and Judaism and body-image. Each theme has been further divided into between two and three sub-themes, all of which represent a different facet of the primary theme. These themes are among the findings that

characterise the present research, and may suggest that the long-held belief of minority groups as being unaffected by poor body-image and eating pathology is in fact a dated belief.