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# “I Kinda Feel Like Wonder Woman”: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Pole Fitness and Positive Body Image

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The purpose of this research was to describe and interpret the positive body image experiences of women actively engaged in pole fitness. A total of seven women between the ages of 20 and 36 years participated in semistructured one-on-one interviews and follow-up interviews. Participant observation was also used to generate data. Data were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach, and the positive body image experiences of women are represented by five themes: (a) observation and exposure fostering body acceptance, (b) performance promoting self-confidence, (c) personal growth and sexual expression, (d) unconditional community support creates comfort, and (e) body appreciation through physical skill development. Findings suggest that women engaging in pole fitness may experience positive body image, and the words of participants provide insight into the components of pole fitness that may foster positive body image. Pole fitness may provide a unique exercise context whereby women can develop and maintain positive body image.

**Keywords:** exercise, interviews, observation, pole fitness, positive body image, qualitative, women

In recent years, pole dancing as exercise (pole fitness) has become an increasingly popular physical activity, particularly among young women (Holland & Attwood, 2009). This exercise context is generally promoted as a means for participants to create a positive relationship with their body by building strength and flexibility through sensual dance movement (Donaghue, Kurz, & Whitehead, 2011). The increased popularity and promotion of such exercise coincide with the increased emphasis on how to develop positive body image, especially among those who already possess, or may be at risk of developing, negative body self-perceptions (Castonguay, Gilchrist, Mack, & Sabiston, 2013). If pole fitness does positively impact how a woman feels about her body, this exercise context may be an avenue for interventions to promote and build positive body image. However, the exploration of positive body image, when compared with negative body image, is relatively new within the body image literature (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Therefore, it is important to better understand how individuals experience positive body image, as well as to explore unique contexts in which positive body image may be fostered, such as pole fitness.

According to Cash and Smolak (2011), body image is complex and multidimensional, and is made up of affective, behavioral, perceptual, and cognitive components of body experience. To date, most researchers who have examined body image have focused on negative aspects, with a particular emphasis on associated constructs, such as body dissatisfaction (Cook-Cottone & Phelps, 2003). However, in recent years, positive psychology perspectives have influenced how body image is understood, with more researchers focusing specifically on positive body image (Castonguay et al., 2013). Researchers such as Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2010) described how positive body image is often conceptualized as merely the absence of negative body image, but they argued that positive body image is a distinct construct with unique signifiers. More specifically, Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015b) argued that positive and negative body images are not on the same continuum, whereby having low negative body image does not translate to high positive body image. Instead, it is possible to experience body dissatisfaction, a measure of negative body image, while at the same time experiencing some components of positive body image, namely respect and appreciation for the body (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013).

Although the study of positive body image is gaining momentum, there is relatively little consensus on how it should be defined or conceptualized. Positive body image has typically been operationalized as body

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appreciation or body satisfaction (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005). The Body Appreciation Scale focuses on the body appreciation aspect of positive body image, yet it does not necessarily support an understanding of other potential characteristics or facets of positive body image that have been identified in recent qualitative research (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). As suggested by Avalos et al. (2005), researchers should consider the use of qualitative research designs to support the examination of positive body image, as such research can generate themes that would facilitate an in-depth understanding of the complexity of this construct.

Recognizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of positive body image, Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) proposed a definition of positive body image that includes antecedents, maintenance factors, and consequences. Conceptualized as an overarching love and respect for the body, Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) described how positive body image allows individuals to appreciate their body's unique beauty and function, accept or even admire their body, and feel beautiful and confident. Furthermore, positive body image allows individuals to emphasize their body's assets, have a mindful connection with their body's needs, and interpret incoming information in a body-protective manner. Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015b) described how positive body image is nuanced by the extent to which it may protect well-being and how it is shaped by unique social identities. Social identity refers to a person's perception of their "oneness with a group" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 20), and Tiggemann (2015) explained that by examining what positive body image might "look like" for various groups, including special populations such as dancers, it may be possible to gain an in-depth understanding of experiences of positive body image. Researchers have suggested that participating in certain forms of dance or "embodying" activities (i.e., activities that promote a sense of ownership and respect of the body) may facilitate positive body image (Tiggemann, Coutts, & Clark, 2014; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). This study was focused on women who actively participated in pole fitness because pole fitness has been identified as an embodying activity and context that may enhance positive body image (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). As such, by focusing this study on women who actively participate in pole fitness, it may be possible to better understand the complexities of positive body image.

According to Holland (2010), it is difficult to identify when pole dancing was initially offered in the form of exercise classes, but there has been rapid growth in the popularity and prevalence of pole fitness over the past 10 years. She described how pole fitness is more than just dancing or performing tricks on a pole; pole fitness involves athleticism, artistry, and skill (Holland, 2010). Given the surge in popularity of pole fitness, this has spurred some researchers to examine the psychological and social impacts of this exercise context. For instance, through the voices of instructors and participants of pole classes, Holland (2010) described how women espouse

liberation and initiate agency with respect to their bodies, age, and gender. Contrary to expectations of gendered exercise contexts (i.e., those contexts that are stereotypically perceived as women's exercise), such as various forms of dance and group exercise/fitness classes (McGannon & Spence, 2012), women in pole classes are "often red-faced and sweating, of varying ages and sizes. . . . It is mostly not glamorous" (Holland, 2010, p. 3). Pole classes have been criticized in academic and public domains for being too sexual and part of the sex industry, yet women in Holland's research described how pole classes provided them with opportunities to resist gendered and embodied expectations. Within western cultures, there is a gendered expectation for young women to be feminine, which includes expectations of being a nurturer, dependent, helpless, and physically inactive (Choi, 2000). Women in western cultures are expected to be thin, youthful, and sexy (Boyd & Murnen, 2017; Grogan, 2017) as well, and they are often depicted as sexual objects to be desired by heterosexual men (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Women are regularly faced with unrealistic expectations and body ideals that are unattainable for most women, and, unsurprisingly, when compared with men, women in western cultures experience greater body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann, 2004). As argued by women in Holland's study, the pole fitness context encourages women to be physically active in ways that support them in resisting such gendered expectations.

Aside from the work of Holland, the majority of existing literature on pole fitness has focused on the social issue of whether or not pole fitness succeeds in "empowering" participants or if it is simply another arena for the objectification of women, whereby women's bodies are evaluated and inspected by others. For example, Bahri (2012) argued that pole fitness classes and competitions work to maintain distance from the negative social stigmas associated with "actual" pole dancing, and choosing to pole dance for fun and fitness is empowering. Evans, Riley, and Shankar (2010) also argued that, although activities such as pole fitness may work to subvert gender norms, they are still required to draw on, and, therefore, perpetuate, "dominant discourses of female sexuality, including objectification" (pp. 126–127). Objectification theory posits that women within western cultures are constantly looked at, evaluated, and potentially objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Subsequently, women learn to internalize these views and may begin to treat themselves as objects to be evaluated, a process known as self-objectification. Self-objectification is problematic in that it can contribute to appearance anxiety and body shame (Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). Although researchers have suggested that pole fitness may perpetuate objectification (Evans et al. 2010), Tiggemann et al. (2014) found that women who participated in belly dance (i.e., another embodying dance form) scored lower on self-objectification and higher on positive body image when compared with a group of college women. Therefore, although focused on

a different dance form, findings from Tiggemann et al. (2014) suggested that participating in such embodying activities may indeed reduce self-objectification and enhance positive body image.

Researchers have highlighted critical social and cultural considerations regarding pole fitness, and pole fitness may provide a unique context in which to better understand the positive body image experiences of women who participate. Petersson McIntyre (2011) described how pole fitness was consistently reinforced by instructors as a healthy way to challenge conventional ideas of femininity and sexuality. Pellizzer, Tiggemann, and Clark (2016) recently examined how enjoyment of sexualization through the embodied activity of pole fitness contributes to positive body image as well. Although Pellizzer et al.'s (2016) findings provide critical insights into the construct of the enjoyment of sexualization and its relationship to positive body image, the quantitative nature of the study did not support a detailed exploration of the various features of pole fitness that may shape women's positive body image experiences.

Notwithstanding, Wood-Barcalow et al.'s (2010) grounded theory that produced an operational definition of positive body image, within the vast body image literature, relatively few researchers have used qualitative methodologies to explore positive body image. Although various qualitative study designs could support an in-depth understanding of positive body image, phenomenology provides a unique opportunity to more fully understand how positive body image is *experienced*. Phenomenological approaches have been employed to understand the body experiences of women, particularly in regard to fitness and exercise. For instance, Allen-Collinson (2011) argued that phenomenology can enable a researcher to better understand how a woman experiences body consciousness within the context of exercise and fitness. Similarly, Lökman (2011) employed a phenomenological framework to explore gender embodiment in females learning Aikido, a Japanese self-defense sport, and found that physical movement of a person is bound by context and culture. Specifically, women exist in a world or context that is laden with gendered expectations, and Lökman (2011) described how women became aware of their movements as a result of "lifelong learning and gendered socialization" (p. 273). The aforementioned studies demonstrate how phenomenological approaches can be used to better understand women's experiences of their bodies, specifically within the context of fitness.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the methodology for this study as it involves a comprehensive process for exploring how individuals make sense of significant life experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Unique from other phenomenological approaches, IPA acknowledges the central role of the analyst or researcher in interpreting or "making sense" of the participants' shared experiences. Within the body image literature, researchers have drawn upon IPA in their

exploration of complex phenomena, including the body perceptions of elite woman basketball players (Bennett, Scarlett, Hurd Clarke, & Crocker, 2017), changes in body image and social support experienced by breast cancer survivors that participated in dragon boat programs (McDonough, Sabiston, & Crocker, 2008), and the meaning of participating in a pro-anorexia Internet site (Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006). The purpose of this IPA was to describe and interpret the positive body image experiences of women actively involved in pole fitness.

## Methods

IPA includes three main concepts: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology is focused on individual accounts of lived experiences. Within this study, lived positive body image experiences were illuminated through interviews with women actively involved in pole fitness. In terms of hermeneutics, IPA is composed of a double hermeneutic process whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant who is trying to make sense of his/her experience (Smith, 2004). In addition to interviews, observation was employed in this study to support a more in-depth understanding of the pole fitness context and how this context may shape the positive body image experiences of women. Such detailed understandings supported us as researchers when we sought to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their own body image experiences. A more detailed description of the interpretative or hermeneutic process is provided in the Data Analysis section. Finally, ideography refers to the process of engaging in single case in-depth analyses prior to producing any general statements. As outlined in the Data Analysis section, within this study, each woman's interview transcript was analyzed prior to developing any general statements regarding body image experiences. The ideographic nature of IPA supported the exploration of commonalities and discrepancies within, and then between, participants and provided rich data to interpret participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

## Participants

A total of seven women between the ages of 20 and 36 years participated in this study. Participants were recruited in person from a local pole fitness studio in a western Canadian city. Criterion sampling, a type of purposeful sampling, was used to ensure that all participants met "some predetermined criterion of importance" to the study (Patton, 2002, p. 238). For this research, it was important that all participants were women who were, at the time of the study, enrolled as a student in a weekly pole fitness class. To support criterion sampling, the known sponsor approach was applied, whereby a person who has an existing, legitimate relationship with a specific group facilitates researcher access (Patton, 2002). In the case of this study, the known sponsor

was the owner of several pole fitness studios from which participants were recruited.

Each participant was provided with the opportunity to provide a self-description and to choose a pseudonym to support anonymity. *Anastasia* (30 years; vet technician) described herself as a “fitness junkie” with 4 years of pole fitness experience. *Athena* (28 years; sales coordinator) had participated in pole fitness for 2 years and, at the time of the study, was working toward her third round of the master’s level (i.e., one of the highest levels of pole fitness taught at the studio). *Lola* (36 years; stay-at-home mom) had been involved in pole fitness for 6 years. *Nikita* (22 years; psychology student) had 2 years of pole fitness experience. *Olive* (20 years; dance teacher) described herself as “new to pole fitness”; she had less than 1 year of pole fitness experience. *Roxy* (23 years, social work student) had 5 years of pole fitness experience, and *Scarlett* (31 years; tattoo artist) had 10 years of pole fitness experience. Of the participants, four (Anastasia, Nikita, Roxy, and Scarlett) were involved in pole fitness both as students and instructors.

### Data Generation

Data were generated via three phases: (a) observation, (b) semistructured one-on-one interviews, and (c) follow-up interviews. Prior to data generation, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

**Observation.** Observation involves observing what happens in a given setting, listening to discussions, using informal and/or formal interviews to ask questions, and taking an active role in the setting to study a phenomenon of interest (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Consistent with Holland (2010) who also used observation as a key method of data generation, participant observation was conducted within this study by the first author who engaged in two pole fitness classes. Each class lasted 6 weeks and took place at the studio from which participants were recruited. This provided an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of pole fitness as well as foster a rapport with potential participants. Detailed field notes were taken immediately following each class to capture important details about the pole fitness context and how this context may shape the body image experiences of women.

*Research context and personal experience:* I, the first author, remember completing a science fair project titled “Body by Influence” when I was 14 years old. As a white Euro-Canadian teenage girl who regularly experienced negative body image, I was drawn to this topic in an effort to understand the various factors that influence girls’ and women’s body images. Since this time, and now as a woman in her early 20s, I have also experienced positive body image. However, I know I have often struggled to have a positive relationship with my body. For several years, I have been curious about pole fitness. I heard it described as an excellent form of

exercise as well as a great way for women to develop better relationships with their bodies. However, having no pole fitness experience, I enrolled in two pole fitness courses to gain a deeper understanding of how this context may shape the body image experiences of women. The particular studio I attended had one open room with dark red walls. Three of the walls featured floor-to-ceiling mirrors, and seven poles in a variety of sizes, metals, and function (stationary or spinning) were placed in front of the main wall of mirrors. One wall was composed of windows covered by dark curtains, and the floors were hardwood. Each pole fitness class was composed of 10 women (between the ages of 20 and 50 years), whereby an instructor would lead us through a warm-up, and then we would be broken into two groups. One group would learn “pole moves” and the other would do “floor work” for approximately 30 min, and then the two groups would switch. Each class ended with “community pole,” which I described in my field notes in the following way:

At the end of class the instructors hold community pole, which is where everyone shows off what she learned to the group—the two rules are you *have* to sexy strut to and from the pole, and when you’re not at the pole, you must cheer for the girls who are. The instructor turns off all the lights except for the lamp at the front of the room and cranks the music (which has been playing in the background for the whole class), and she asks each group if they have a specific song request (something that makes them feel really sexy). The first group goes up with the pole instructor and runs through the moves they just learned. There’s a lot of whooping, “work it girls, work the pole,” and general hooting, hollering, and cat-calling. Even though it’s the first class, this section makes you feel really great and supported.

Learning all of the new pole moves and spins, in particular, elicited a wide variety of emotional reactions from me. In my field notes I wrote, “I still didn’t get the fireman spin, which was frustrating. I know it’s a mental issue, but I’m just having trouble breaking past it.” Although this was frustrating, I also remarked “I have to say, with all the hair flipping, body rolling, and ‘booty’ shaking, I was feeling pretty great—I actually found myself checking myself out in the mirror a few times!” By exploring and highlighting the various emotions that I experienced within the context of pole fitness, I developed a strong foundation for my ability to interpret the range of experiences that participants shared with me. I also gained a deeper understanding of the unique features of the pole context that may, in turn, facilitate positive body image.

The second and third authors also self-identify as white Euro-Canadian women. Both authors describe themselves as physically active, and each of them explain how a variety of sport and exercise experiences have contributed to their ongoing range of body image experiences, including negative and positive experiences. Given

their respective experiences and interests, they have each been involved in qualitative studies that have included an exploration of women's body image (e.g., Larson, McFadden, McHugh, Berry, & Rodgers, 2017; McHugh, Coppola, & Sabiston, 2014). Throughout the remainder of this manuscript, the term "we" is used when referring to all coauthors and the term "I" is used when referring to the first author.

**Semistructured one-on-one interviews.** When engaging in IPA, semistructured interviews provide the participant and researcher flexibility to explore the participant's perspectives (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Consistent with recommendations by Smith and Osborn (2003), the interview guide consisted of questions that were broad and open-ended to generate a detailed description of the participant's experiences with as little researcher input as possible. Probe questions were created to follow the main interview questions and were used if the participant had difficulty understanding or answering the initial question. The interview guide contained 11 questions that were informed by our previous qualitative body image research with women (e.g., McHugh et al., 2014). More specifically, questions focused broadly on body image ("How does pole fitness make you feel about your body?"), but also included questions specific to positive body image ("How do you define positive body image?" and "How might pole fitness facilitate positive body image?").

The interview guide was updated and adapted following a pilot interview with the known sponsor and the initial observation phase. For instance, in an effort to be responsive to the known sponsor, and based on my "sexy strut" experiences from the observation phase, the following question was added: "There appears to be a strong emphasis on sexuality/sensuality in pole fitness. How do you think this shapes how you feel and think about your body?" I conducted interviews at private tables in various coffee shops chosen by participants. With respect to the interview process, Smith and Osborn (2003) described how it is important to support participants in feeling comfortable and at ease prior to engaging in interviews. I am confident that my participation in pole fitness supported the development of relationships with women who participated in this research. Arguably, such relationships facilitated a sense of comfort among the women when they shared their body image experiences. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Follow-up interviews.** The purpose of this third phase of data generation was to provide participants with the opportunity to revisit the interview guide and to share experiences that they may not have discussed during their initial interview. Follow-up interviews also allowed for member checking, which involves the researcher verifying his or her descriptions and interpretations of the raw data with the study participants. Given the interpretative role of the researcher in IPA (Smith,

2004), member checking is not necessarily an essential process within IPA. Smith and McGannon (2017) have critiqued the process of member checking, arguing that there is "no evidence base to support it as a verification method" (p. 17). However, member checking was included in an effort to ensure that the words and experiences of the participants were represented in the way in which was intended (Mayan, 2009). I presented participants with themes and supporting quotes that were generated from the analysis, and they were provided with an opportunity to share their reactions to my interpretations, including their support or disagreement. Participants described how the rapport that was established during the observation and one-on-one interview phases of this research supported them in feeling comfortable sharing their reactions. All participants supported my interpretations of the raw data (i.e., themes and supporting quotes) and explained that my interpretations were representative of their experiences.

## Data Analysis

Following Smith and Osborn's (2003) four steps for IPA, I analyzed the data. Consistent with the ideographic nature of IPA, the first step of the analysis involved reviewing the first participant's transcript several times and generating themes based on interesting and/or significant statements. Specifically, themes were generated based on those statements or shared lived experiences that were interpreted as being particularly relevant to better understanding positive body image. My experiences participating in pole fitness facilitated the identification of significant statements, as I had developed a more in-depth understanding of the pole fitness context, which subsequently supported my interpretation of participants' experiences. This inductive and flexible process supported the identification of unanticipated topics or themes (Smith, 2004). Within the second step of analysis, themes were ordered in a way that allowed the connections between these key themes to become more apparent. As in the first step of this process, I focused on ensuring that the themes remained connected to the raw data; that is, they remained connected to the words of the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The third step of analysis involved repeating Steps 1 and 2 with the other participants' transcripts. Repeating patterns that mimicked the previously analyzed transcript(s) were noted, while also remaining open to new issues/themes that may have not been present in the first transcript. Again, the observation phase of this research provided me with the necessary foundational knowledge and experiences that supported me in remaining open to identifying new themes. Once the analysis was completed for each participant, a final list of overarching themes was compiled by looking for commonalities and discrepancies between participants. From this list, themes were prioritized and reduced until the themes left were those that best represented the experiences of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The final step of analysis involved expanding the themes into a narrative account, whereby

direct quotes from participants and contextual information from observation were used to provide context for the interpretation of their experiences.

Various guidelines for evaluating the strength of an IPA study have been identified in the IPA literature (see Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009), and a number of these guidelines were applied within this study. For instance, IPA studies should have a clear focus and include a homogenous sample, which we have articulated in the previous sections. In addition, Smith et al. (2009) described how special awareness should be placed on the interview process, as effective interviews will result in strong data. Within this research, I had extensive training in conducting interviews, and two interviews were conducted for each participant. Sensitivity to context is also an important consideration (Yardley, 2008), and, therefore, within this study, observation was incorporated as an important process of data generation.

## Results

The purpose of using IPA was to describe and interpret the positive body image experiences of women actively involved in pole fitness. The words and experiences of the participants are represented by five main themes: (a) observation and exposure fostering body acceptance, (b) performance promoting self-confidence, (c) personal growth and sexual expression, (d) unconditional community support creates comfort, and (e) body appreciation through physical skill development.

### Observation and Exposure Fostering Body Acceptance

The studio in which participants engaged in pole fitness had floor-to-ceiling mirrors on three walls, and each class consisted of a small group of women working in close proximity on pole exercises, stretches, and strength exercises. Based on my own experience within this exercise environment, I argue that this context allows for women to observe not only their own bodies, but also the diversity of body shapes and sizes of others in their class. Olive described her first experience in pole fitness whereby she noticed, “All of the girls were a lot of different sizes. And it seemed like what you were learning about how to control your body had nothing to do with how you were made.” Lola indicated that the supportive environment of pole fitness, combined with the opportunity to participate in pole fitness alongside women of various shapes and sizes, played a significant role in learning to accept all parts of her body, stating:

The way I see myself now and how I saw myself then is like a total 180. Yeah, [pole fitness] just helped me love what I see in the mirror. Before, I was very critical of what I saw in the mirror. . . . And, if that makes sense, yeah, pole just helps you learn to be beautiful from the inside. And then it comes out, and then what you see in the mirrors,

you’re just . . . for me, it changed from “oh, I wish my hair was a little longer, I wish my nose was a little smaller, I wish, you know, my tummy was a little flatter.” It turned into “my hair looks great today, and I’ve got lovely teeth, and, yeah, my tummy isn’t the flattest, but it’s had three kids and I’m damn proud of that.” It just turned into, the negative wasn’t there, it was always positive.

Discussion of learning to accept their bodies was often framed around body size and certain features that are commonly portrayed in media as being attractive and desirable, such as a flat stomach and toned muscles. My interpretation of the participants’ shared experiences is that learning to accept their bodies involved coming to terms with not having certain features that the media portrays as attractive. This acceptance involved a process of refocusing, whereby the women placed their attention on other factors, not necessarily physical features that they deemed more important to their overall well-being. As Nikita explains, “I am far more forgiving when it comes down to ‘oh darn, I don’t quite have the washboard abs that I really want from the magazines.’” Athena expanded on this, alluding to the need to be happy with the way you are:

You wouldn’t want everyone to be the exact same, and I think a lot of it just comes with being happy with who you are and being content with the way you look. And whether that is being fit, and whether that is being lean, or whether that is just you being happy with the way you are, if that’s carrying 10 extra pounds, then, that’s what it is, right?

Anastasia shared how her involvement in pole fitness has caused her to reframe how she thinks and feels about the shape of her body stating, “I don’t worry so much about the shape, et cetera, of what I look like, it’s probably for a reason, because it helps me to get somewhere.” In addition to an overall acceptance of perceived flaws, participants also discussed how pole fitness has helped them become more comfortable with showing off the shape of their bodies. As Roxy reveals:

In the beginning, I was very nervous about my body. As I increased in the pole levels of my studio, I became much more comfortable in wearing smaller amounts of clothing. Now, I feel no shame in wearing a bra and booty shorts—even when meeting and teaching brand-new students, or around friends in my classes. Most women in all of my higher-level classes have different body types, but nobody is judgmental because we all have the same fitness ability and physical strength, whether you carry a bit of extra weight or not.

Participants described how the observation of and exposure to diverse bodies in pole fitness helped them to accept their bodies as they are, regardless of how their bodies may differ from conventional ideas of attractiveness and desirability. As such, I argue that

the women were able to reevaluate their physical imperfections that were once negatively viewed. Within a new positive framework, participants were able to recognize their own unique beauty.

### Performance Promoting Self-Confidence

Having participated in pole fitness, I gained an in-depth understanding of the central role of performance within this exercise context. Each pole fitness class culminates in a mandatory “community pole” whereby every participant gets up in front of their peers and shows off what she learned during that class. The women are encouraged to be sexual and sensual in their movements, with one rule of community pole being that you have to “sexy strut” to and from the pole. Many participants discussed how this is often awkward and uncomfortable at first, but it actually helps women develop confidence. Anastasia described the process of learning to be confident in herself and her body, and highlighted that sometimes you have to “fake it till you make it.” She further explained that the performance aspect of the class helps women feel empowered when they are being watched by others:

We have to do that in front of people, even though you might still be awkward because I’ve only been doing it for a year, being in front of strangers all the time wandering your hands and stuff like that and being, like, “I’m totally comfortable!” [. . .] It’s my body, it’s what I want to do! When I pole dance, I feel amazing, unstoppable, and just I kinda feel like Wonder Woman.

Although the term confidence was not explicitly stated by all participants, all of the women’s shared stories were interpreted as them having developed some self-confidence. Participants explained that performing for others in pole fitness had helped them develop self-confidence that came from within and was not dependent on feedback from others.

Participants discussed how their new-found confidence through pole fitness had extended to confidence in other areas of their life. As stated by Olive, “when you become comfortable and confident with yourself, the image of yourself will increase. And normally if you’re feeling a lot better about yourself, you’re going to have a more positive outlook on everything.” Lola explained that a benefit of the confidence she gained from pole fitness was that she has learned to not worry about what other people think:

It’s hard to articulate. Yeah, totally freeing. And a little example of that is, when I would go out with girlfriends, if we were going to go to a dance bar or something like that, I would have to have a certain amount of drinks in order to be able to dance on the dance floor. It’s just what I needed. Now, I don’t even need to be drinking and I can dance on the dance floor. I feel so much better about who I am and I care less about what other people think.

My interpretation of one of Anastasia’s shared stories is that through pole fitness she learned to become less self-conscious in general. Her new self-confidence was portrayed in the way she walked and presented herself in public. Anastasia stated:

A big detail I noticed in my life that changed was, this sounds silly, but before starting [pole fitness classes], even somewhere such as just going out for coffee, if I had to get up to go to the bathroom I would kind of head down and scurry, just, like, “ok, hopefully no one’s looking, off I go.” Whereas, not long after starting classes I noticed that my shoulders are down and back and I’m walking just at a normal human pace [. . .] I don’t run past and worry about if people are looking anymore.

My personal experiences with pole fitness, combined with the numerous shared experiences of participants, support my interpretation that the performance aspect of pole fitness contributes to the development of participants’ inner confidence and the expression of that confidence in everyday life.

### Personal Growth and Sexual Expression

Pole fitness classes emphasize sexual expression, and during my time in pole fitness classes, I observed that all aspects of each class incorporated the use of the word “sexy.” I noticed that all moves learned (both on the floor and pole) were taught and performed in a sexualized manner as well. As stated by Roxy, “First of all, yes, there is a sexual stereotype with pole dancing. And that’s completely fine!” Participants are constantly encouraged to incorporate “wandering hands” (i.e., running hands slowly over body) into their movements. It is my interpretation that this emphasis and normalization of sexual expression supported participants in becoming more comfortable with their own sexuality in a variety of contexts, whether it be in pole fitness class, alone, or with a partner. Olive explained, “You’re kind of placing the power in how you feel in yourself and not other people. And, like I said before, it [pole fitness] makes you feel comfortable and confident in your body, which is empowering, because then you’re, like, ‘hey, I know I’m sexy I don’t need to rely on other people to tell me that, like, I *know* I’m hot, I don’t need other people to tell me that.’”

Athena noted that there are stereotypes associated with how women should act, but also questioned whether or not it was wrong for women to be proud of their bodies and sexuality. She further highlighted that pole is a safe environment where women can explore their sexuality:

I know there can be also a fine line between pre-conceived notions as to what a woman should do. But at the same time, there’s nothing wrong with a woman being proud of her body and being proud of what she can do, and being flirty and sexual [. . .]



I find that a lot of [sexuality] is very hush-hush, and I think [pole fitness] is kind of a place where you can go and you can kind of enjoy what you can do, and you can go and you can do some wandering hands. And when you first learn it, you're just terrified, you're just, like, 'oh my god, what am I doing? And I feel so awkward and I feel so weird.' But really, what's wrong with it?

Anastasia indicated that becoming comfortable with sexual expression is a process. My understanding is that Anastasia was initially uncomfortable, which is likely the result of social taboos or expectations surrounding female sexuality. In her account of overcoming discomfort with sexual expression, Anastasia stated:

Wearing fitted pants and stuff just scared the living daylights out of me. And the wandering hands also very much scared me. So when I'm in class, I've found it's really good to push those boundaries with myself and get more comfortable with myself that way [ . . . ] looking back at four years ago wandering my hands just scared me so much, whereas now, my mindset is very much, "it's your body, you should feel comfortable putting your hands on it before you let anyone else do that," it doesn't make sense to let other people if you're not [comfortable].

Several participants specifically addressed the idea that pole fitness provides a "protected" and "safe" space in which women can express themselves sexually without fear of being judged. As stated by Nikita,

It's nice to be able to kind of embrace your feminine and sensual side and not feel judged for it, because, again, in class, it's a protected area. All the ladies are so supportive, so it's nice to be able to kind of engage in that, where oftentimes female sexuality can be seen as taboo.

Participants also spoke about the sense of control they had of their own bodies and sexuality, and talked about how the music played during class helped with this. Roxy indicated that certain songs make her "feel gloriously sexy" and "in control of my sexuality," while Olive discussed how the lyrics of specific songs can be empowering:

I always find songs that have sexy themes or highlighting a girl that's really attractive but unreachable, works. But I feel highlighting the attractive girl that's unreachable just kind of helps build your confidence [ . . . ] It puts all the power in your lap because it's who you decide you want to pay attention to, kind of deal. It's you deciding if you give it out or not, right?

I interpret the pervasiveness of sexual expression in pole fitness as a key component that encouraged participants to become more in tune with their own sexuality

and challenge previous "conservative" or "sheltered" views they might have previously had regarding appropriateness of acting sexy. Participants discussed appreciation for the freedom to explore their sexual side in a supportive environment. Ultimately, I argue that this exploration resulted in personal growth, increased comfort with their bodies, and general body pride.

### **Unconditional Community Support Creates Comfort**

Having experience in two pole fitness classes, it is clear to me that such exercise contexts aim to develop a sense of community through instructor and peer encouragement. Through my own experiences, I noticed that the instructor interacted a lot with all the participants to establish a rapport. Furthermore, participants are told to cheer for their peers during community pole. As stated in the field notes from my observation, "there's a lot of whooping, 'work it girls, work the pole,' and general hooting, hollering, and cat-calling. This section makes you feel really great and supported." My sentiments are supported by many participants who stated that pole fitness offers a supportive environment to help reduce the initial awkwardness or discomfort that may be experienced when exploring this exercise context.

Throughout a number of the stories shared by participants, I became particularly aware of the manner in which participants spoke about the unconditional support and lack of judgment in pole fitness classes. Athena detailed the lack of judgment from other women in pole fitness, sharing, "you go into class and no one's judging you. If you are wearing your little short-shorts and you have some cellulite, nobody's pointing that out." In addition, I interpreted a story shared by Athena as her critiquing the manner in which women are constantly comparing themselves with others. She suggested that the support that is fostered through pole fitness does not provide space for such comparison:

And I just find it's just camaraderie, and that opening environment where people aren't there to shut you down, they're not there to be rude to you. You're all there for the same thing, and generally you're all there to be supportive of one another. You see women of all ages, you see women of all sizes, and it's that environment that we try to create where it's just warm and inviting, and it's accepting, and you don't judge because at the end of the day, we could all be in that situation. [ . . . ] I think women are hard enough on themselves that we don't have to be hard on each other as well.

Some participants discussed the social uniqueness of the pole fitness setting and how it contrasts with other fitness classes or environments. As Athena asserted:

I find sometimes with pole classes, you discuss things that you wouldn't necessarily discuss in, like, a gym setting. You discuss body image, and

for some of the moves, you'll end up taking off your shirt and end up working out just in your sports bra because you need the skin-to-pole contact. It's just things like that you would never do in a regular gym [ . . . ] You know what I mean? You whip off your shirt, you go upside down on the pole, and nobody judges you. I just find pole is just so empowering in that sense, and there's just no boundaries.

Based on the stories shared by participants, it is my interpretation that pole fitness is a supportive environment that encourages women to accept and appreciate their bodies. Such support may be particularly meaningful for those women who have harbored negative thoughts and feelings about their appearance. As stated by Scarlett, "The biggest thing I noticed when I was taking classes is the instructors and how encouraging and supportive they were. And [the instructors] cut down any negative talk." Similarly, Lola explained how the women in pole fitness play an important role in her own body acceptance. She said, "They're there for you. And for me that was always so strange, because I felt a lot of the time women are more critical of each other than supportive of each other, and pole is completely different for me." This suggests that the socially supportive environment of this fitness context could help participants reframe their thoughts and self-talk and facilitate positive body image experiences.

### Body Appreciation Through Skill Development

Participants described skill development, strength, and flexibility training as the focuses of pole fitness. Classes are structured such that strength exercises and stretches are practiced during floor work, dance moves are taught as a complement to pole techniques, and a variety of spins or inversions are learned on the pole. The various stories shared by participants support my interpretation that women who participate in pole fitness develop a deep appreciation for what their bodies are capable of doing. As Nikita observed:

[ . . . ] it's just very rewarding to come back each week and getting to see how much stronger I am each week, how long I can hold certain movements for, and just the level of strength that's involved in all the different moves. Things that I found difficult when I started out are not so hard anymore, and finding variations on how to work on them. And so, it becomes less to me about body image and shedding the pounds, the focus isn't so much on the scale as it is on the technique and mastering those moves. . . . It gives me a better appreciation of my body for what it can do as evidenced by stuff I can do on the pole now.

Further justification for this interpretation was provided by several other participants who echoed the idea that pole fitness is primarily about mastering skills and

not about what you look like. Roxy shared "I think positively, not only about my fit figure, but also my ability to walk, run, and pole dance!" She further stated, "Everybody is more concerned about mastering a skill than what they look like in the mirror." Olive discussed the idea that body size has nothing to do with ability and drew attention to the instructors who focused on skill development. Similarly, Scarlett described feelings of empowerment that resulted from her physical and mental skill development through pole fitness:

It isn't even like "oh look how good I look in the mirror" it's more "look at all these crazy things that I can do, like, I'm so strong now and I'm so bendy, and, you know, I can hang upside down with one arm, or whatever." It's such a challenge physically and mentally. If you do have any hang-ups about what it is and if it's good or bad or whatever, it's completely empowering because I think, yeah, like I said before, just the level of confidence and when you start to see how much your body changes and you're in control of that, it's not somebody else that's doing it.

Participants described how, as a result of pole fitness, they had developed greater body strength. Lola, when speaking about the factors that have kept her involved in pole fitness, stated, "And what keeps me in it now is just constantly challenging my mind and my body to do things that I didn't ever think they could do. And didn't ever imagine that I would want to do."

Participants shared that pole fitness had helped them develop an appreciation of what their bodies could do for them. Nikita, using an example of a specific skill, discussed how rewarding it was to see her skill set develop, "For me, again, when I'm in a strength hold leg extended butterfly, and I can look at myself in the mirror and say, 'oh my god, I'm upside down and in a split, this is really cool!'"

My interpretation of the women's shared experiences is that pole fitness provides women with the opportunity to develop an appreciation of their bodies by emphasizing skill mastery over appearance. Furthermore, overcoming challenges was described as a source of pride for participants' bodies, as well as a means by which women develop an understanding of what their bodies are capable of and can do for them.

## Discussion

Findings from this research contribute to the positive body image literature by supporting an in-depth understanding of a specific context in which women experience positive body image. The results indicate that several components from Wood-Barcalow et al.'s (2010) definition of positive body image were experienced by the women in this study. Specifically, body acceptance, confidence, and body appreciation were all expressed by participants during the interviews. By

understanding specific contexts, such as pole fitness whereby positive body image may be experienced, it is possible to identify salient features and experiences that could be incorporated into programs to foster positive body image. For instance, the shared experiences of participants in this study suggest that positive body image programs should consider the inclusion of activities that focus on the functionality of women's bodies rather than their appearance. By participating in pole fitness, women in this study became more aware of what their bodies were capable of achieving, which subsequently fostered body appreciation. This finding is consistent with experimental research by Alleva, Martijn, Van Breukelen, Jansen, and Karos (2015) who found that a program that trained women to focus on the functionality of their bodies increased body appreciation. The program described in Alleva et al.'s study was composed of three structured writing assignments, and, when combined with the findings from this study, suggests that women can learn to focus on body functionality in various ways. The combined findings suggest that body functionality is a contextual factor that could be incorporated into programs focused on enhancing or promoting positive body image as well.

In addition to a focus on body functionality, activities that accept and invite the participation of women of various shapes and sizes could promote body acceptance and, ultimately, the experience of positive body image. Participants in this study shared how the performance aspect of the classes allowed for observation of, and appreciation for, the diversity of body shapes and sizes in the class. Such findings are consistent with previous research by Downey, Reel, SooHoo, and Zerbib (2010) who explored body image experiences of belly dancers. Belly dancing, in contrast to other more traditional forms of dance, is more accepting and inviting to a broader range of body types (Downey et al., 2010). Downey et al. explained how this form of dance is more inclusive and allows participants to think critically about and challenge the social perception of what the "ideal dance body" looks like. Findings from this study and those of Downey et al. (2010) highlight the unique role that pole fitness and belly dancing may play in fostering positive body image experiences through the acceptance of all body shapes and sizes.

This research also offers unique insights into specific constructs that have informed current understandings of positive body image. For instance, body appreciation is one of the key components of positive body image that can be assessed with empirical measures; however, current quantitative measures of positive body image do not include a specific focus on body functionality (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Findings from this research suggest that an appreciation of the body's abilities is an important component of positive body image, and, therefore, future measurements of body appreciation (or a more encompassing measurement of positive body image) might consider including questions focused on body functionality. Participants also shared

that pole fitness helped them learn to be proud of their bodies as they overcame physical and mental challenges. This finding is consistent with elements of body pride as conceptualized by Castonguay et al. (2013). According to Castonguay et al. (2013), authentic body pride, much like authentic pride as conceptualized by Tracy and Robins (2007), is elicited by a sense of personal growth and achievement. Participants in this study reported feeling proud of their bodies as a result of seeing what their bodies could accomplish. Furthermore, participants argued that body pride is a reason for their continued involvement in pole fitness. This finding is consistent with those of Castonguay et al. (2013), who suggest that authentic body pride is related to motivational outcomes, such as achievement. Finally, Castonguay et al. (2013) highlighted that body pride is most often elicited in sport and/or exercise contexts, a context that pole fitness provides. Consequently, it may be worthwhile for positive body image interventions to include personal accomplishment-oriented exercise, such as pole fitness, to foster authentic body pride.

Participants in this research shared that pole fitness allows them to recognize themselves as sexual beings and to become more comfortable with sexual expression, regardless of social taboos surrounding women's sexuality. This finding is consistent with those of Pellizzer et al. (2016) who found that enjoyment of sexualization in pole dancers was related to both positive body image and embodiment, which was defined as a strong connectedness with and awareness of one's body. Furthermore, they found recreational pole dancers to demonstrate lower levels of self-objectification compared with a sample of university undergraduate women. This notion that embodied physical activity (i.e., those activities that facilitate a strong connectedness with one's body) is related to decreases in self-objectification and higher levels of positive body image has also been shown in belly dancing (Moe, 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2014) and burlesque dancing (Regehr, 2012). The importance of embodiment is echoed by Holland (2010) who argued that a key aspect of pole dancing might involve participants *feeling* sexy as opposed to looking sexy, or being judged as sexy by others. These previous findings, combined with the words of the participants from this study, provide detailed insights as to how such embodied physical activities, such as pole fitness, can promote positive body image.

Some researchers have suggested that pole fitness or participation in sexualized activities serves to reinforce and perpetuate gender norms regarding sexuality and femininity (Evans et al., 2010). Specifically, Evans et al. (2010) argued that there has been a shift in the discourse regarding contemporary femininity from a more passive woman to a more active and sexually savvy woman. As such, expectations regarding sexuality and femininity have not necessarily been subverted; instead, there has simply been a shift in terms of what the expectations of sexuality entail. Despite such debates, findings from this study suggest that self-sexualization within the context

of pole fitness may have positive outcomes for women. Specifically, pole fitness may provide an environment in which women can actively challenge the taboos placed on female expressions of sexuality (Attwood, 2007) instead of the sexualization or objectification of women. Similar to research with belly dancers, it may be the case that sexiness for women in pole fitness is realized through the process of being “in” the dance, whereby women are able to appreciate their own sensuality rather than by acting in a way that conforms to externally imposed expectations or for the gaze of others (Moe, 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2014). Regehr (2012) has highlighted that although sexuality, particularly in regard to women, is complex, it is important to focus on ways to help ensure women have access to sexual agency, health, and exploration. Although it is crucial that researchers continue to address the impact of sexualization on women, it is equally critical to provide “space for sexual rights” (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009, p. 260). Consequently, spaces such as those provided by pole fitness or other forms of dance exercise, including recreational burlesque and belly dance, may provide spaces away from potential observers in which women can engage in sexual exploration for themselves (Moe, 2012; Regehr, 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2014).

Findings from this study also relate to existing research on self-esteem and contingencies of self-worth. Global self-esteem is an overall assessment of self-worth (Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014), and contingencies of self-worth represent a particular approach to self-esteem in which the focus is on understanding “what people believe they need to be or do to have value and worth as a person” (Crocker & Knight, 2005, p. 200). Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003) suggested that people are more likely to have higher levels of self-esteem when their self-worth is assessed based on core, unique features of the self or “relatively unconditional” external contingencies (p. 895), rather than on their appearance or external reinforcement. Participants in this study described how they learned through pole fitness to be confident in their bodies independent of other people’s approval, suggesting that they experienced development of noncontingent self-worth. Within the body image literature, this is a particularly notable finding, because those women who base their self-worth on appearance are more likely to experience body shame and engage in bodily surveillance (Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014). As recommended by Noser and Zeigler-Hill (2014), interventions should focus on altering the extent to which women’s feelings of self-worth are contingent upon appearance, and findings from this study suggest that pole fitness is one such context that may help to address this recommendation.

Despite the noted strengths of this study, it also has limitations. Participants in this research were from the same pole fitness studio, whereby classes were conducted as a mixture of strength development, “sexy” dance moves, and pole techniques. Holland (2010) highlighted that there is wide variety in terms of how fitness studios structure

classes. Therefore, findings from this research are limited to the more fitness structure of this specific pole fitness class, and future research should explore the positive body image experiences of women from a variety of pole fitness class structures. Four of the participants in this study were pole fitness instructors and they had an ongoing involvement in pole fitness as well. Their extensive backgrounds in pole fitness may have contributed to unique perspectives that likely vary from those of an average pole fitness student. Future research should include more pole fitness students at a variety of skill levels to explore the diverse positive body image experiences.

This research occurred during a short timeline and required participants to reflect back on their experiences. Therefore, future research should consider an ethnographic approach to provide a rich, thick description of how positive body image is experienced and potentially develops or evolves over time. Ethnographic approaches are sensitive to context and typically occur over an extended timeframe (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and therefore, provide an ideal framework for understanding the complexities of positive body image. The study of body image within the pole fitness context is relatively novel and warrants more research attention as well. Given that positive body image and negative body image are distinct constructs that can be experienced at the same time (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013), future research should consider exploring negative body image in an effort to contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the broad range of body image experiences within pole fitness and similar contexts.

In summary, this research has extended the positive body image literature in a number of ways. Specifically, the in-depth stories shared by women demonstrated that pole fitness is a context whereby positive body image can be experienced. This research provided unique insights into various constructs (e.g., body pride) that have informed contemporary understandings of positive body image as well. Finally, findings from this research highlighted important considerations for the development of programs to foster positive body image.

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