Pole Fitness and Positive Body Image:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to describe and interpret the positive body image experiences of women actively involved in pole fitness. Seven women between the ages of 20-36 years participated in one-on-one interviews to discuss their experiences surrounding their bodies and pole fitness. Additionally, participant observation was utilized to provide context for data analysis, and follow-up interviews were utilized to engage in member checking with all participants. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to identify five superordinate themes representing the words and experiences of the participants: (1) accepting your body as it is, (2) inner confidence, (3) comfort with sexual expression, (4) supportive environment, and (5) appreciating your body's abilities. Findings are consistent with emerging conceptualizations of positive body image (e.g., Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015), and provide insight into a specific context that may be useful in the promotion of positive body image. In addition, findings suggest that pole fitness provides a unique environment in which women can safely engage in sexual exploration. This research suggests that pole fitness may be an avenue by which women can develop and maintain positive body image.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Ariel Janoah Dimler. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Pole Fitness and Positive Body Image”, No. Pro00049738, July 7, 2014.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Darrell Wayne Dimler. Daddy, you inspired my academic journey in so many ways, and I wish you were here to see this accomplishment.

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I would like to give special thanks to my mother, Shannon, and my sisters, Jenna and Lindsay. Your unfailing support has allowed me to fully pursue my academic goals and to remain focused and motivated even in times of stress or frustration.

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Introduction

In grades nine and 10, I completed a science fair project titled "Body by Influence" that grew out of my desire to understand the role that media played in the body image of teenage girls. As a teenager myself, who was more and more frequently experiencing feelings of body dissatisfaction and negative body image, I wanted to better grasp the reasons behind not only my own struggles, but the struggles of all of my peers.

This science fair project sparked my love of psychology, particularly positive psychology, and ignited a desire to help people. At that time, I wasn't really sure *who* I specifically wanted to help but I knew that psychology was the right path for me. Throughout the course of my final high school years and throughout the majority of my undergraduate degree, I believed that I wanted to pursue a career in sport psychology. It was only two years ago that I determined sport psychology was not the right fit for me. As a result, I spent several months unsure of what direction I wanted to pursue in my graduate studies. Upon arrival at the University of Alberta and discussion with my supervisor, I determined that I wanted to engage in research with women in a way that allowed me to optimize my interest in positive psychology.

While attempting to define a specific MA thesis idea, I found myself reflecting upon my own experiences as a young woman. Again and again I was brought back to my constant struggle to have a positive relationship with my body. The old desire to understand the relationship between women and their bodies was reignited when I thought back to the times that I was reduced to tears in a change room due to overwhelming dissatisfaction with my own body. Instead of exploring negative body

image, as I had in the past, I decided I wanted to look at positive body image, as this would allow me to draw upon the field of positive psychology.

For several years I have been curious about pole fitness classes, as I have heard them talked about as both a phenomenal form of exercise as well as an excellent way for women to develop better relationships with their body. Additionally, I have repeatedly heard young women that are close to me in age express interest in such classes not only because of the exercise component, but also because of more psychological benefits such as a positive body relationship and increased confidence. The claims of pole fitness to help shape a more positive relationship between women and their bodies, combined with the fact that positive body image is a relatively new field of study, seemed to me an obvious research connection to make. My own body image experiences, combined with my interest in pole fitness classes, have shaped this research.

The first chapter of this thesis provides an overview of existing literature for both pole fitness and positive body image. In addition, chapter one highlights some gaps in the literature to provide justification for the focus of this research. The second chapter of this thesis outlines the methodological guidelines for this research. Chapter two includes a discussion of the overarching method for this study, considerations surrounding participants and participant recruitment, a discussion of the data generation and data analysis techniques utilized in this research, as well as an explanation of the ethical considerations and verification strategies utilized in this study. The third chapter of this thesis presents the results of this study, all of which are organized according to the themes identified via data analysis. The fourth chapter of this thesis is a discussion of the study results. Specifically, chapter four includes a discussion of how the results of this

study fit with current research, how these results uniquely add to literature on positive body image and pole fitness, and the limitations and future directions of this study.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

In recent years, pole dancing as exercise has become a relatively popular mainstream activity (Holland & Attwood, 2009). Often, although not all the time, pole dancing as exercise is referred to as pole fitness. This term encompasses a general approach that combines the more sensual/sexual components of pole dancing with exercise (Holland, 2010). This exercise is generally marketed as a means of creating a positive relationship with one's body. The increase in the popularity and promotion of such exercise mirrors the ever-increasing interest in finding ways to study and promote positive body image (Castonguay, Gilchrist, Mack, & Sabiston, 2013) among young people in general, and young women (and adolescent girls) in particular. If pole fitness does in fact positively shift how a participant in that class feels about her body, this may be an avenue for creating interventions to promote and build positive body image. However, it is important to first define positive body image experiences.

Positive body image research is rooted within the field of positive psychology, an academic field that has been spearheaded by the work of Martin E. P. Seligman (e.g., 2002, 2011). Positive psychology focuses on enhancing positive attributes and human strengths (Diener, 2009). Seligman (2011) states that positive psychology seeks to move individuals towards a state of flourishing, in which people experience happiness, love, meaning, gratitude, flow, growth, better relationships, and accomplishment. All of these components contribute to complete well-being, which is the overall indicator of flourishing. The study of positive body image is relatively new within the field of positive psychology and, as a result, little is known about how it is experienced.

Therefore, it is important to study contexts in which positive body image may be experienced, such as pole fitness classes.

This literature review will provide an overview of existing research in pole fitness, with a focus on describing current interpretations of pole fitness while also highlighting gaps in the literature. Additionally, this literature review will provide a general overview of body image research, beginning with negative body image research and ending with an explanation of current understandings of positive body image. Exploring the literature pertinent to pole fitness and positive body image will establish a solid foundation from which to justify the direction of this research.

Pole Fitness

Body image literature suggests a relationship between exercise[1] and body image (Martin-Ginis & Bassett, 2011). The mechanisms of this relationship have been widely studied, which has led to the suggestion that perceived changes in physical fitness and physical self-efficacy are the means by which exercise increases body image (Martin-Ginis & Bassett, 2011). Martin-Ginis and Bassett (2011) also highlight that exercise frequency and intensity are positively related to improvements in body image. Given the relationship between exercise and body image, it is not surprising that in recent years there has been an increase in exercises, such as pole fitness, that claim to promote not only physical fitness but to also positively influence the way participants (generally young women) perceive their bodies (Donaghue, Kurz, & Whitehead, 2011).

According to Holland (2010), it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when pole dancing

[1] According to Martin-Ginis and Bassett (2011), exercise is "planned, structured, and repetitive physical movement that is performed in order to improve or maintain physical fitness" (p. 378).

was initially offered in the form of exercise classes. Various instructors interviewed by Holland (2010) indicated that major growth in the popularity and prevalence of pole fitness classes has occurred in approximately the last 10 years, and the steady increase in popularity of such classes has come about by word of mouth and the media. One of the difficulties with defining pole classes is that there are a wide variety of opinions by instructors and students about what constitutes a pole class. Generally, opinions on how pole classes should be defined fall into two major categories: pole class as exercise, or pole class as the more stereotypical "stripper" dance (Holland, 2010). Pole classes as exercise tend to focus more on skill and athleticism, while pole classes as dance tend to keep an emphasis on the sexuality/sensuality associated with pole dancing (Holland, 2010). Regardless of how a person chooses to define their pole classes, Holland (2010) highlights that the majority of women do emphasize that pole is about more than just dance or performing tricks on a pole; it involves skill, athleticism, and artistry. Putting differences in style aside, the majority of instructors and students in Holland's (2010) study discussed body image, fitness, and body confidence when talking about pole classes. Holland (2010) noted that overall "the instructors wish to help their students enjoy their bodies" (p. 69), and that "although the philosophy differs it looks the same" (p. 70). In other words, although the classes may look different from one another in terms of structure, they often share the same basic goals (e.g., better body image for the women who take these classes).

Pole classes are offered in a variety of venues. Most commonly, they are offered in studios. These studios may be part of a gym/health club, or may be specifically dedicated to pole (Holland, 2010). The majority of pole classes share many common

elements, such as clothing and music selection, regardless of which style of pole class is emphasized (Holland, 2010). However, due to the previously discussed link between body image and exercise, this thesis is focused on pole classes with an emphasis on exercise. The term "pole fitness" will therefore be used throughout.

The majority of the existing literature on pole fitness (e.g. Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009) has utilized a feminist perspective to analyze if pole fitness is actually "empowering" or if it is simply another arena for the objectification of women. In other words, the bulk of pole fitness literature (e.g. Bahri, 2012, Whitehead & Kurz, 2009) examines the role of pole fitness within a larger cultural and social framework rather than exploring women's individual experiences. For example, in order to describe how participants in this form of exercise talked about their involvement in pole fitness, Whitehead and Kurz (2009) carried out a qualitative study. The primary focus of this study was to utilize a feminist framework in order to examine ideological issues surrounding pole fitness; this was achieved by using discursive analysis of interviews and focus groups. Whitehead and Kurz (2009) explored the idea that pole fitness, although it is a form of exercise, falls within a "sexual liberation/empowerment" (p. 226) discourse. The focus of this exploration was whether or not pole fitness challenges traditional female sexuality or serves to simply confirm traditional gender and sexuality norms, rather than the role it played in participants' everyday lives.

Donaghue, Kurz, and Whitehead (2011) engaged in an analysis of pole fitness websites in order to identify the major ways that pole fitness is advertised. Four major themes were identified, which included "fitness first" (p. 448),

"confidence/empowerment" (p. 449), "performance and audience" (p. 451), and "having a laugh" (p. 453). Pole fitness classes were advertised as "empowering," but only if a woman falls within certain guidelines of empowerment determined by people other than herself, and as long as she doesn't become *too* "sexy"/"slutty" (Donaghue et al., 2011). This is problematic as it removes the woman's choice that is so loudly heralded by pole fitness studios (Donaghue et al., 2011). While it is important to understand how pole fitness is advertised, and how these advertising techniques can have negative implications, it is equally critical that research, such as the proposed study, also consider how pole fitness can be a positive experience for the women who participate in these classes.

Similarly to Donaghue et al. (2011), a study carried out by Evans et al. (2010) examined the framework of raunch/"porno-chic" culture and how pole fitness fits within this framework. Raunch culture is representative of the striking re-sexualization of women and their bodies, in which women are active participants under the rhetoric of "agency, choice, and self-determination" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 115). The authors arrive at the conclusion that no matter how much 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" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 126-127). Again, this leads to the question of whether or not pole fitness classes are actually empowering.

Bahri (2012) suggested that viewing pole fitness as empowering is problematic because engaging in pole fitness serves to further stigmatize those women who work as strippers/exotic dancers. This suggestion contradicts the more common idea that pole

fitness is disempowering because it has grown out of a job that is subjected to the male gaze. Pole fitness classes and competitions work to maintain distance from the stigmas associated with "actual" pole dancing, such as the idea that dancing for money is demeaning and dis-empowering, whereas pole dancing for fun and fitness is empowering (Bahri, 2012). Therefore according to Bahri (2012), the empowerment of women engaging in pole fitness is coming at the expense of other women. This is counterproductive to the broad goal of feminism to achieve equality for women (Fiss, 1994) as it requires relegating certain women to a lower social rung in the pursuit of empowerment. While this is certainly problematic, this is not necessarily representative of the perspectives of women at an individual level.

While the aforementioned research highlights critical considerations regarding pole fitness, the experiences of the women who participate in pole fitness are not well understood. By highlighting the voices of women in such classes, it may be possible to better understand their positive body image experiences. The few pole fitness studies that do place a greater emphasis on the experiences of participants are often not focused on the body, but instead focus on the general idea of pole fitness. For example, Petersson McIntyre (2011) highlighted the difficulty pole fitness (or, striptease aerobics) instructors had navigating the questions of empowerment or exploitation that surround pole fitness. It was found that the instructors understated the sexual aspect of pole fitness, while consistently reinforcing that pole fitness provides a healthy way to challenge conventional ideas of femininity and sexuality (Petersson McIntyre, 2011). While Petersson McIntyre (2011) focused on listening to the words of the participants, this study did not highlight women's body image experiences within the context of pole

fitness classes.

In a study of burlesque fitness, Regehr (2012) found that women who participated in such classes desired a gain in positive body image. Regehr's (2012) focus was on the experiences of the women, not on the broader social and cultural implications. Regehr, nevertheless, recognized feminist scholars' concern that activities such as burlesque fitness may serve to reinforce sexual oppression at a societal level. These concerns have also been raised by pole fitness literature. While the women who participated in the Whitehead and Kurz (2009) study described pole fitness as fun, empowering, and liberating, Whitehead and Kurz (2009) used these experiences to explore the meaning of pole fitness at a greater social level. I argue that it is important to further explore women's individual experiences in pole fitness in order to better understand what pole fitness may contribute to women's lives. My study, thus, expands the work of existing pole fitness literature (e.g., Whitehead & Kurz, 2009) by focusing specifically on individual women's positive body image experiences.

Body Image

There is a vast amount of research on body image. According to Cash and Smolak (2011), body image is complex and multidimensional, and is made up of the affective, behavioural, perceptual, and cognitive components of body experience. Until recent years, body image has been studied largely with females, as it was assumed that males did not face body image issues (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2011). Murnen (2011) highlighted that men and women have different body image concerns (e.g., muscularity vs. thinness), and that body image satisfaction is much more closely associated with

psychological well-being for women. Therefore, the focus of the current study is on women and body image.

The majority of body image research focuses on the negative body image, with a particular emphasis on constructs such as body dissatisfaction. For example, Verplanken and Tangelder (2011) examined the role of negative thinking in body dissatisfaction, and found that habitual negative body image thoughts were related to chronic body dissatisfaction, as well as the prediction of negative self-esteem and eating disturbances. Additionally, it was found that women scored significantly higher on measures of habitual negative body image, indicating greater levels of body dissatisfaction (Verplanken & Tangelder, 2011). Jones, Buckner, and Miller (2014) explored how negative body image, body dissatisfaction, and a drive for thinness chronologically progress for adolescent females. It was found that while body dissatisfaction scores varied between participants, body dissatisfaction as a whole was widespread. The study indicated that body dissatisfaction increased sharply between the ages of 14-16 years for adolescent girls. This increase was mirrored by increases in drive for thinness, although this increase was not as drastic, and began to taper off at age 17 while body dissatisfaction levels remained consistent (Jones, Buckner, & Miller, 2014). These findings are consistent with other research focusing on negative body image and adolescent girls. For example, Wertheim and Paxton (2011) indicated that an extensive number of girls experience body dissatisfaction and that this experience is magnified over time.

Body dissatisfaction research has also focused on college-age women, and such research indicates that body dissatisfaction rates are high among this group (Cook-

Cottone & Phelps, 2003). Salk and Engeln-Maddox (2011) found that the number of college women who engage in "fat talk" with their friends is extremely high, and that higher rates of fat talk are associated with increased levels of body dissatisfaction. Additionally, Salk and Engeln-Maddox (2011) found that increased fat talk was related to internalization of the thin-ideal. Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, and King (2012) suggested that exposure to ultra-fit *and* thin images increased body dissatisfaction among college-aged women. Research that focuses on negative body image is prevalent, which mirrors the prevalence of negative body image and body dissatisfaction among many adolescent and college-aged young women.

Grogan (2011) pointed out that, although the bulk of literature on body image is based on young adults, body image concerns are also relevant to adults over the age of 30 years. The percentage of women who report body dissatisfaction decreases as they age; however, levels of body dissatisfaction that are reported by adult women (i.e., 30 years and older) are similar to those reported by young adult women. Additionally, these body image concerns focused on the same body locations as those of young women, such as the stomach and hips (Grogan, 2011). Grogan (2011) suggested that body dissatisfaction in adult women may be attributed to the pressure Western media places on women to maintain "slender, youthful bodies" (p. 94). Due to the prevalence of body dissatisfaction among young women, it may be tempting to focus body image research on this specific sample. However, it is important to not overlook the body image experiences of adult women.

In recent years positive psychology has begun to influence how body image is studied, which has led to research that has examined positive body image (e.g.,

Castonguay et al., 2013). In the past, positive body image has been classified as merely the absence of negative body image (e.g., Grogan, 2010). However, researchers (e.g., Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010) have recently argued that positive body image is not simply the absence of negative body image; instead, positive body image is a separate construct with unique signifiers. Although the study of positive body image is becoming more prominent, there is relatively little consensus on how it should be defined or conceptualized. Most research on positive body image has focused on one component of positive body image. In particular, positive body image is typically operationalized as body appreciation or body satisfaction (e.g., Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; McVey et al., 2010).

Avalos, Tylka, and Wood-Barcalow (2005) identified the need for research on positive body image, and therefore developed a scale to measure the body appreciation component of positive body image. The Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) was developed for use by a variety of clinicians to aid in a more thorough assessment of a person's attitudes towards his or her body (Avalos et al., 2005). Again, this research only focused on the body appreciation aspect of positive body image (a fact that was acknowledged by the researchers). More recently, McVey et al. (2010) engaged in a pilot study that was aimed at promoting positive body image among university students, and this research used body satisfaction to measure positive body image. The researchers used a "life skills and media literacy approach" (p. 202) and found that three-hour teaching sessions (e.g., skills for promoting self-esteem and body image) were related to an increase in body satisfaction and a decrease in thin-ideal internalization (McVey et al., 2010). While such findings are informative, it only speaks to one aspect of positive body image.

Other researchers have also focused on ways to improve body image. For example, Appleton (2012) highlighted that six sessions of 40 minutes of exercise led to an improvement in the body image of participants, even when their weight and shape did not change. This increase in body image occurred in areas such as body appreciation and satisfaction, which are components of positive body image (Appleton, 2012). Research on positive body image is becoming more prominent, but most commonly focuses on single aspects of this construct. It is important that future research, such as this study, consider other potential facets of positive body image in order to better understand how the phenomenon is experienced.

One of these potential facets of positive body image is the study of how self-conscious emotions such as pride may be relevant to the body. Pride is conceptualized as being constructed of two facets, achievement-oriented (authentic) and hubristic pride (Tracy & Robins, 2004). Tracy and Robins (2007) indicated that these forms of pride differ based on attribution processes, in which authentic pride results from attributing success to effort, whereas hubristic pride results from attributing success to ability. In terms of body pride, a person's "success" is his or her body. Castonguay et al. (2013) explored the role of body pride in the positive body image of young adults. It was found that body pride was most often experienced within the context of social sport and exercise settings, and both types of pride were related to feelings of accomplishment; however, the two forms of pride had different triggers. Authentic pride was triggered by feelings of personal accomplishment (effort), while hubristic pride was triggered by feeling superior to others (Castonguay et al., 2013). Gender was also a factor in the experiences of body pride, in which females had pride experiences triggered by clothing

and weight, and males had pride experiences triggered by competition, muscularity, and strength (Castonguay et al., 2013). Research focused on body pride can provide unique insights about an individual's experience of positive emotions towards their bodies. However, it may be too narrow a construct to fully capture the complexities of how a person may experience positive body image.

Body self-compassion is another construct that has received recent attention in the positive body image literature. Originally a concept found in Eastern (Buddhist) philosophy, self-compassion has started to develop as an important construct in Western psychology over the past decade, largely due to the work of Kristin Neff (e.g., 2003a, 2003b). According to Neff (2003b), self-compassion involves being kind and caring to oneself, having a lack of judgment for perceived shortcomings, and acknowledging that one's experiences are common human experiences as a whole. The concept of self-compassion has provided a novel approach to understanding how people can form a more positive outlook on their bodies.

Berry, Kowalski, Ferguson, and McHugh (2010) built upon the work of Neff (2003b) and proposed that self-compassion might have subsections that are domain specific, such as body self-compassion. Through one-on-one interviews and a focus group, three essential components, or essences, of body self-compassion were identified. These components were "appreciating one's unique body, taking ownership of one's body, and engaging in less social comparison" (Berry, Kowalski, Ferguson, & McHugh, 2010, p. 299). Appreciating one's unique body involves understanding that one's beauty and body type is unique, as well as appreciating and respecting the unique capabilities and limitations of one's body. Berry et al. (2010) suggested that appreciating one's body

is similar to self-kindness. Taking ownership of one's body entails the desire to be healthy and care for one's body (Berry et al., 2010). To elaborate further, taking ownership of one's body is a process that requires a person to take steps to understand her body in order to make good health decisions, as well as taking responsibility to adjust negative thoughts and behaviours that could adversely affect well-being. Finally, engaging in less social comparison involves developing a more positive body attitude through a reduction in comparisons to unrealistic standards (Berry et al., 2010). Body self-compassion is a construct that serves to explain a process by which a person can develop a more positive relationship with her or his body. However, as is the case with constructs such as body pride, body self-compassion has not been applied to a clear definition of positive body image. Additionally, like body pride, body self-compassion may be too narrow a construct to represent the complexity of positive body image. In order to study positive body image more thoroughly, it is important to have a clear operational definition that encompasses all facets of the construct, instead of focusing on specific aspects such as body pride or body self-compassion.

Research on body self-compassion, body pride, body appreciation, and body satisfaction all offer insight into positive body image, and positive body image continues to be operationalized in a variety of ways within body image research. Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2010) provided a comprehensive definition of positive body image in a qualitative study that focused on young (college aged) women and body image experts. After conducting one-on-one interviews, the researchers utilized a grounded theory method to develop positive body image themes. These themes were then integrated into a definition of positive body image (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). This

definition covers a wide variety of components, and is most meaningfully presented using the words of the authors. According to Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010), positive body image is:

> An overarching love and respect for the body that allows individuals to (a) appreciate the unique beauty of their body and the functions that it performs for them; (b) accept and even admire their body, including those aspects that are inconsistent with idealized images; (c) feel beautiful, comfortable, confident, and happy with their body, which is often reflected as an outer radiance, or a ‘‘glow;’’ (d) emphasize their body’s assets rather than dwell on their imperfections; (e) have a mindful connection with their body’s needs; and (f) interpret incoming information in a body-protective manner whereby most positive information is internalized and most negative information is rejected or reframed (p. 112).

There is minimal positive body image research that has yet to utilize this definition provided by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010). However, this comprehensive definition may support researchers in understanding experiences of positive body image. For example, the definition of positive body image provided by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) can be used as a guide when interpreting the body image experiences of a person in a given context, such as within the context of pole fitness classes.

Body image research has highlighted elevated levels of negative body image and body dissatisfaction for women. While recent years have included an increased interest in positive body image, it is important to continue exploring positive body image experiences for women. Positive body image is not simply the lack of negative body image, and therefore understanding women’s positive body image experiences is crucial

for the development of positive body image as a unique construct. Additionally, the majority of body image research is quantitative (e.g., McVey et al., 2010). It is certainly important to have measures of various aspects of body image, such as the Body Satisfaction Scale used by McVey et al. (2010), however the use of quantitative measures does not allow for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. It is particularly important to use qualitative methods in order to more fully understand how positive body image is experienced.

Phenomenology and Women's Body Image

Within the vast body image literature, relatively few researchers have used qualitative methods to explore positive body image. A key qualitative study that utilized qualitative methods to examine positive body image involved using grounded theory to create an operational definition of the construct (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Grounded theory is used to produce innovative theories and/or models that are based in data representative of people's lived experiences (Fassinger, 2005). Therefore, using a grounded theory approach was appropriate for the aim of Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) to create a comprehensive definition of positive body image. Other qualitative methods must now be utilized for understanding contexts in which positive body image may be experienced. Using a phenomenological approach provides researchers with the opportunity to hone in on women's words, in order to more fully understand how positive body image is *experienced.*

While phenomenological studies related to women and body image (negative or positive) are scarce, phenomenological approaches have been used to understand more broad body experiences that women may have (e.g., Groven, Solbrække, & Engelsrud,

2011; Lökman, 2011), particularly in regards to fitness and exercise. Allen-Collinson (2011) explored how a feminist perspective and phenomenological approach could be used to understand female sporting embodiment. Using her 25-years of running experience, largely as a solo female runner, Allen-Collinson (2011) highlighted that years of experiencing harassment from males forced her to become jarringly aware of her body. She is no longer able to run with ease in her environment, but is instead forced to direct her attention to her body while being on alert for attackers. Phenomenology can enable a researcher to better understand how a woman experiences consciousness of her body within the context of exercise and fitness.

Lökman (2011) studied gender embodiment in females learning Aikido, a Japanese self-defense sport. Using the phenomenological framework posited by Merleau-Ponty, in which the physical movement of a person is bound by context and culture, Lökman (2011) explored how female participants became aware of their movements as the result of "lifelong learning and gendered socialization" (p. 273). Furthermore, it was found that as the women learned new techniques they began to use their bodies in different ways as they moved throughout the world (outside the Aikido dojo); women's experiences with their bodies in Aikido lead to a transformation in their overall approach to everyday life (Lökman, 2011). Groven, Solbrække, and Engelsrud (2011) also utilized the Merleau-Ponty phenomenological framework to understand the experiences of obesity for large women in a Norwegian exercise context. It was found that the structure of the exercise routine kept the women boxed into the cultural norm of a slim, toned female body ideal, which in turn prevented "exploration of personal kinaesthetic experience and reflective subjectivity" (Groven et al. 2011). 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.

The studies conducted by Groven et al. (2011) and Lökman (2011) utilized a very particular phenomenological framework (i.e., Merleau-Ponty). Although a myriad of phenomenological approaches have been developed, all are focused on better understanding people's experiences and what this can reveal about a phenomenon of interest. Therefore, the success of utilizing phenomenology to understand women's broad experiences with their bodies suggests that a phenomenological approach is an appropriate choice for exploring the positive body image experiences of women in pole fitness.

Purpose

There is a need for increased understanding of what positive body image is, as well as how it is experienced. One way in which researchers can better understand positive body image is to seek out contexts in which people, specifically women, are actively seeking positive body image. A context in which women seem to be turning to for positive body image is pole fitness, as demonstrated by the participant descriptions in the Whitehead and Kurz (2009) study. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore positive body image experiences within such classes. I ask, specifically, do women who engage in pole fitness experience positive body image, and what do these experiences look like? The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to describe and interpret the positive body image experiences of women actively involved in pole fitness.

Chapter Two: Method

A phenomenological perspective guided this study. While there are a multitude of phenomenological approaches to research, all approaches are linked by common features. At the core of phenomenology is a desire to explore and understand how people make sense of their experiences, how they convert these experiences to a conscious awareness, and what this reveals about the essential structures, essences, or themes of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). In other words, a phenomenological perspective encourages a researcher to better understand how people perceive, feel about, remember, describe, make sense of, and talk about their experiences (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), a phenomenological perspective aids researchers in determining study methods that will accurately "capture people's experiences of the world" (p. 107). Within phenomenology, an experience (also known as a lived experience) is an "immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 35). According to Van Manen (1990) an experience occurs when a person is "immediately and naturally" (p. 36) involved in a life activity without being actively aware of the experience. Reflecting upon, and re-living the experience after it has happened, allows a person to gain retrospective appreciation for the significance of that experience (Van Manen, 1990). By using a phenomenological perspective, the researcher is able to gain insight into the essential structures, essences, or themes of a phenomenon by retroactively exploring a person's experience(s). Within the confines of this study, the phenomenon of interest was positive body image, and pole fitness provided the experiences by which the themes of positive body image were explored.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The guiding method for this study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA explores how people make sense of their social and personal world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As in other forms of phenomenology, IPA is focused on how an individual perceives his or her experiences in order to better understand a phenomenon of interest (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA acknowledges that the research process is dynamic, with both the researcher and the participant bringing their own perspectives and constructions to the research (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Therefore, as the researcher attempts to understand and take the perspective of the participant, the interpretation of phenomena and experiences is shaped by both the knowledge of the participant and the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is an overarching research method that may encompass different modes of data generation; Smith and Osborn (2003) highlight that "as you proceed, you may find yourself adapting the method to your own particular way of working and the particular topic you are investigating" (p. 53). This allows the researcher to adapt IPA to the demands and needs of a particular study.

The decision to utilize IPA was made for several reasons. First, IPA has been identified as a method of study that is particularly useful when a researcher is "concerned with complexity, process or novelty" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). The study of positive body image is a recent development in the field of positive psychology (e.g., Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Similarly to positive body image, pole fitness has only recently been studied within academia (e.g., Donaghue et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2010). Therefore, the study of both positive body image and pole fitness is considered to be novel and emergent, and IPA can aid in understanding the experiences of individuals in a

new area of study. Second, IPA focuses on developing a rich analysis of a person in order to "do greater justice to the totality of the person" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 52). This is accomplished by not only trying to understand the viewpoint of an individual but also by critically assessing the words of that person. The process of IPA will be more thoroughly discussed in the data analysis section of this method chapter. Third, IPA views people as cognitive, affective, linguistic, and physical beings, whereby the words of the participant can accurately reflect how they think and feel about their being (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Therefore, IPA is an appropriate method to use when trying to understand the body image experiences of participants.

I am unaware of any phenomenological studies that have explored positive body image and pole fitness. However, research (e.g., Berry et al., 2010) suggests that a phenomenological approach can support a deeper understanding of various body phenomena. Therefore, it was appropriate to utilize phenomenology within the current study that sought to understand and interpret the positive body image experiences of women in a pole fitness class. IPA was chosen over other phenomenological methods (such as empirical phenomenology) as my paradigm acknowledges that understanding and interpreting participant experiences is not possible without the inclusion of my own perspectives and experiences, an idea that is unique to IPA.

Participants

Prior to the recruitment of participants, ethics approval was obtained via the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Alberta. As the IPA approach is used to generate a detailed account of participants' lived experience through multiple forms of data generation (Smith & Osborn, 2003), a great depth of data can be generated with a

relatively small number of participants. Generally, the recommended number of participants for a phenomenological study falls between 3-10 participants (e.g., Creswell, 2013; Mayan, 2009; Morse, 2000). The current study focused on quality of data (Morse, 2000) rather than quantity; therefore, 7 participants were recruited.

Recruitment occurred via purposeful sampling, as it is important that the participants fit within a homogenous sample that provides the researcher the ability to utilize a research question that is significant and relevant to all members of the chosen group (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Purposeful sampling also aids in identifying participants who will be able to clearly articulate their experiences regarding the phenomenon (Olson, 2011). In this case, the phenomenon of interest was women's positive body image and how it is experienced in a pole fitness class. 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 the current thesis it was important that all participants were women who were actively involved in pole fitness. To support criterion sampling, the known sponsor approach was utilized. A known sponsor is a person who has an existing, legitimate, relationship with a specific group; the known sponsor approach is noted for its effectiveness in gaining access to a field of interest (Patton, 2002). In the case of this study, the known sponsor was the owner of several pole fitness studios within the area of Edmonton, Alberta.

The women recruited for this study were between the ages of 20 and 36 years old, as adult women are at risk for negative body image and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Cook-Cottone & Phelps, 2003; Grogan, 2011). Since negative body image is relatively common for women, they may seek exercise and fitness classes not only for better physical fitness,

but also to feel better about their bodies (i.e., to promote positive body image). Participants were recruited in person from local pole fitness studios in the Edmonton, AB area, as these classes are advertised as an avenue to physical fitness *and* becoming confident and sexy; additionally, recruitment occurred via posters that were approved by the known sponsor. Prior to recruitment, I gained permission from the studio owner to speak to the women taking classes.

At the beginning of the one-on-one interviews, each participant was given the chance to choose a pseudonym in order to support anonymity. One participant chose her pseudonym, whereas the other six participants indicated that they did not have a preference; therefore, I assigned pseudonyms to these participants. Each participant provided a self-description before beginning the interview. *Olive* (20) described herself as a dance teacher who was raised in open, welcoming, and encouraging household that encouraged engagement in masculine and feminine activities regardless of gender identity. Olive indicated that she was new to pole fitness. *Roxy* (23) described herself as a married woman with no children, as well as a social work student, and further explained that she has been involved in pole fitness for five years as both a student and instructor. *Lola* (36) described herself as a stay-at-home mom of three kids and explained that she used to be a nurse. Lola stated that she has been involved in pole fitness on and off for the past six years (as an instructor and student), and that she does pole because it's something just for her. *Athena* (28) described herself as a former elementary school teacher and current sales coordinator. She explained that she has taken pole classes for two years (and was currently in her third round of the Master's level, one of the highest levels of pole fitness taught at the pole fitness studio), and taught classes for approximately a year.

Anastasia (30) described herself as a recently married woman, and stated that she is a vet technician and fitness junkie. Anastasia explained that she has been involved in pole fitness for four years, having taught for three of those years. *Nikita* (22) described herself as a psychology student who formerly worked as a carpenter. She indicated that she has been taking pole fitness classes for two years and that she has recently begun to instruct. *Scarlett* (31) described herself as a tattoo artist, and explained that she has been involved in pole fitness, as both a student and instructor, since approximately 2004/2005.

Data Generation

Data generation occurred in three phases. The first phase consisted of participant observation, the second phase consisted of one-on-one interviews with each participant, and the third phase consisted of follow-up interviews with each participant. The second phase, one-on-one interviews, was the primary mode of data generation in keeping with the recommendations for IPA as set forth by Smith and Osborn (2003).

Phase one. Participation observation involves observing what happens in a given setting, listening to discussions, using informal and/or formal interviews to ask questions, and taking a role in the setting in order to study a phenomenon of interest (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Davies (2008) stated that participant observation is less a discrete, single research method, and more a research strategy that encompasses a variety of methods. Consequently, I engaged in participant observation in order to facilitate the other methods of data generation that were utilized over the course of the research. Within the context of this study, participant observation was undertaken by engaging in two six-week pole fitness courses; this provided me the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of pole fitness. Although participant observation has not been explicitly

stated as a key component of IPA, Smith and Osborn (2003) have highlighted that IPA may be adapted to the needs of the particular researcher and research topic. As it was important to gain insight into pole fitness classes for a variety of reasons (e.g., context, creating an interview guide), it was therefore appropriate to utilize participant observation as a mode of data generation in this study.

As detailed by Davies (2008), "participation in the everyday lives of people is a means of facilitating observation of particular behaviours and events and of enabling more open and meaningful discussions with informants" (p. 81). Therefore, participant observation served to foster rapport (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) with participants, which was particularly useful in facilitating semi-structured interviews. In order to facilitate participant observation, I enrolled in a level one pole fitness course at a local Edmonton, AB studio in the fall of 2014. Detailed fieldnotes were taken immediately following each class, in order to capture important details about the context and environment that may be facilitating positive body image.

Research context and personal experience. As previously mentioned, what constitutes pole fitness can vary widely from studio to studio and instructor to instructor (Holland, 2010). Therefore, it was important to take detailed notes of the pole fitness studio from which participants were recruited, as well as my personal experiences. The pole fitness studio was located in Edmonton, Alberta and is one of several studios within Edmonton. The particular studio I attended had one open room with dark red walls. Three of the walls feature floor to ceiling mirrors, and placed in front of the main wall of mirrors are seven poles in a variety of sizes (e.g., small, medium, large circumference), metals (e.g., brass), and function (e.g., stationary or spinning). The far right wall is

comprised of windows covered by dark curtains, and the floors are hardwood. To the far left of the studio entrance (which features three benches and a small reception desk) is an area used for floor work (e.g., stretches and strength exercises).

Two instructors were always present to lead the level one class, which was comprised of 10 women (approximately between the ages of 20 and 50 years) including myself. Each class followed a similar structure, in which an instructor would lead us through a warm-up, with particular focus on the arms and wrists, 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 minutes, and then the two groups would switch so that everyone had time on the pole and on the floor. After the first class I noted that, "Everyone is pretty quiet and it's a little awkward (not surprising), and the one instructor is talking *a lot* (to try and make everyone feel more comfortable I think)." All aspects of each class incorporated the use of the word "sexy" and all moves learned (both on the floor and pole) were taught and executed in a sexy way. During the first class, as one instructor was teaching us hip rotations she said, "This is a little crass, but imagine you're clenching a pencil in your "lady bits" and drawing a circle on the floor." We were encouraged to incorporate "wandering hands" into many aspects of the class, which involves running your hands slowly over your upper body (e.g. arms, waist, neck, etc.). Each class ended with "community pole" which I described in my fieldnotes 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 (e.g., 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.

Level one focuses on teaching students basic spins, while still incorporating sexy transitional moves. Learning spins elicited a wide variety of emotional reactions from me. I noted,

> Doing the fireman spin today, which I am absolutely awful at. I was the *only* one in the class who wasn't able to do it. Everyone else made it look so easy, and several of the women were talking about how "natural" it felt to use their body momentum. Meanwhile, I'm at my pole bailing on attempt after attempt, because I couldn't fight past the mental block that's telling me I can't hold myself up. I'm so pissed off right now because I consistently failed. The instructors kept reassuring me that I'll get it eventually, but I'm not sure when "eventually" is.

A week later 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!" However, it was not long before I had a personal breakthrough in class, and noted:

> I'm feeling pretty elated, because I *finally* was able to do the fireman spin! I did the backwards spin too. I was getting close during practice, but still not quite getting it (I also have a nice bruise developing on my leg to show for my efforts [side note: the instructors refer to bruises as "pole kisses"][side, side note {added in at a later date}: it took about three weeks for that pole kiss to heal…]). During community pole at the end of class I went to attempt this spin, and to my surprise I found myself doing it. I was shocked, and then suuuuuuper excited, and then I realized I had no idea how to finish off the spin once my feet touched the floor, hahaha (I wore my Nike "Just Do It/I Do It" t-shirt for motivation)! It was such an interesting moment – I felt this sense of release and freedom that's kind of hard to describe – it felt all the more sweet considering that I've been struggling with it for weeks now.

Throughout the course of level one I also noted multiple times that the environment was very supportive, particularly during community pole. In my fieldnotes I wrote,

> And I love community pole – both when you're performing and cheering. I feel *so* much more comfortable hooting and hollering when the other girls are at the pole, especially because I know that it helps make you feel so much more confident in what you're doing (at least for me it does when I'm up at the pole).

Overall I found pole fitness to be a positive experience, so much so that I completed level two in February 2015 and plan on returning to pole fitness in September 2015.

Phase two. Interviews, in their many forms, are seen as the basic method of data generation for qualitative research (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The most commonly utilized form of interview is the one-on-one interview (Fontana & Frey, 2000). While interviews often allow the researcher to gather richer data than many other methods of data collection (Smith & Osborn, 2003), it is important to not assume that participants will be able to fully articulate their experiences. Fontana and Frey (2000) highlight that a major assumption of interviews is that they result "in true and accurate pictures of respondent's selves and lives" (p. 646). It is difficult to ensure that participants will be able to fully articulate their experiences but, as indicated by Smith and Osborn (2003), choosing an appropriate sample helps to ensure that participants will be able to capture the key components of their experiences. As interviews can become "intense and involved," it is ideal to conduct them one-on-one with the participant in order to prevent interruption (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.62). When engaging in IPA, semi-structured one-on-one interviews are ideal as they allow the participant and researcher flexibility to explore a participant's perspectives (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Therefore, the one-on-one interviews used in this study were guided, or semi-structured, in order to allow the participant ample room to express her perspective of her positive body image experiences. As well, the semi-structured interviews provided some structure to minimize the chance of the interviews veering off topic (Olson, 2011).

The interview questions were broad and open-ended in order to generate a detailed, accurate description of the participant's experiences with as little researcher input as possible (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Probe questions were created to follow the main interview questions, and were used if the participant had difficulty understanding or

answering the initial question. Throughout phenomenology literature focused on women and their bodies, the use of broad semi-structured interviews is common in order to allow room for the women to fully describe and explore their experiences (e.g., Groven et al., 2011; Ravn & Christensen, 2014). Additionally, there is often an emphasis on questions that focus on "feeling," in order to better understand the intricacies of how the phenomenon of interest is being experienced (e.g., Ravn & Christensen, 2014). The interview guide contained 11 questions (see Appendix A). After the initial development of the interview guide was completed, the known sponsor (studio owner) was recruited to engage in a pilot interview to ensure that all questions were relevant to pole fitness. Additionally, the interview guide was updated and adapted as I engaged in participant observation; for example, a question on sexuality was added after experiencing the structure of pole fitness classes (i.e., "There is a strong emphasis on sexuality/sensuality in pole fitness. How do you think this shapes how you feel and think about your body?"). While some questions specifically addressed positive body image, the majority of the questions included in the interview guide were deliberately broad (e.g., "How does this class make you feel about your body?") in order to avoid influencing participant answers. All questions included in the interview guide were created in order to understand each participant's experiences in-depth.

Before engaging in the interview questions, time was allotted for small-talk and general discussion with the participant to help each woman feel comfortable and at ease (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Each interview was conducted at a location that was comfortable and convenient for the participants, and each lasted for approximately 30 to 60 minutes as per the recommendation of Smith and Osborn (2003) for interviewing

within the IPA method. Before each one-on-one interview, it was emphasized that I was not an expert but instead a co-researcher whereby the participants were the source of knowledge for positive body image experiences. This helped minimize any power relations that could have arisen in a researcher-participant dynamic.

Upon the consent of participants, the one-on-one interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I took field notes during the one-on-one interviews in order to capture the body language and emotions of the participants, as well as to make note of my own feelings and ideas. These field notes aided in providing context for the interviews (Mayan, 2009), which was important for accurately portraying and interpreting the words of the participants during the analysis stage (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As data generation and analysis occurred concurrently, the notes taken for the contexts of the one-on-one interviews were immediately utilized in the interpretation of the raw data (transcripts).

Phase three. The third phase of data generation utilized follow-up interviews. These interviews allowed me to engage in member checking. Member checking occurs when the researcher verifies his or her descriptions and interpretations of the raw data with the study participants, in order to ensure that he or she is accurately representing the words and experiences of the participants (Mayan, 2009). Each participant confirmed that she felt the interpretations of the raw data were accurate. The follow-up interviews also allowed me the opportunity to reiterate how the words of the participants would be shared (e.g., published in thesis, potential peer-reviewed journal publication, conference presentation, research summary to pole fitness studios). All participants indicated that they were comfortable with the ways in which their words would be used for this

research.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning the study, all participants gave informed consent (see Appendix B). Informed consent outlined the time commitment, potential benefits/risks, study purpose, and specific study methods. As well, participants were informed of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Corbin and Morse (2003) note that it is rare to find evidence that participants find qualitative interviews distressing, and that many participants find interviews helpful for working through their feelings on the topic. However, there is always the risk that discussion of a sensitive topic, such as the body and body image, may cause distress in an interviewee as a result of being extremely personal. In such cases, it is possible that strong emotions may be aroused in a participant (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

In order to minimize the potential risks associated with discussing a sensitive topic, Olson (2011) suggests several interview strategies, all of which were included in this study as a contingency plan in the event of participant distress. In the event that a participant becomes emotional while discussing any topic during the course of an interview, Olson (2011) suggested that the researcher states: “Based on what you have told me so far, I have some additional questions that might be difficult to discuss. If you would rather not talk about them, please say so” (p. 57). This statement reaffirms that the participant controls the direction of the interview, while also allowing the participant adequate time to emotionally prepare for the forthcoming questions if they so choose (Olson, 2011). Additionally, Olson (2011) suggests using a private interview setting that is stocked with materials such as water and tissues in case they are required. Within this

setting, if the participant becomes distressed or emotional (e.g., begins crying), Olson (2011) encourages the researcher to sit quietly, and offer the participant a chance to take a break from the interview. These strategies all help create an ethical space wherein a participant can feel comfortable and safe discussing sensitive topics. I was prepared to utilize these strategies in each interview in order to help women navigate discussion of their bodies in an ethical space. However, these strategies were not necessary.

Data Analysis

IPA focuses on accurately capturing and interpreting how people understand their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This ultimately leads to the identification of overarching themes that are representative of the experiences of participants. IPA was used in this study to identify the overarching themes that represented women's positive body image experiences during pole fitness. Smith and Osborn's (2003) four major steps for IPA were followed when analyzing the data. These steps included: looking for themes in the first case, connecting the themes, continuing the analysis with other cases, and writing up.

Looking for themes in the first case involved reading the first transcript several times while making notes about interesting and/or significant statements by the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). During this stage I engaged in free textual analysis in order to understand the text as fully as possible. After going through the transcript several times in this manner, I began to write emerging theme titles on the transcript. It was important to maintain awareness that, although these titles may utilize psychological language, the links to the words of the participant must remain clear (Smith & Osborn, 2003). After this step was completed, I began *connecting the themes*. This occurred by

writing a list of all the emergent theme titles, and then working to order them in a way that allowed the connections between the themes to become more apparent (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Themes were clustered together to create more overarching themes, and were labeled as sub-themes if necessary. As in the first step of this process, the research continually ensured that the themes remained connected to the raw data; that is, they remained connected to the words of the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). A list of the final themes for the transcript was then created, which included sub-themes as well as references to the transcript text that supported the themes.

Once steps one and two in the IPA process were completed, I repeated the process with each following transcript. When *continuing the analysis with other cases*, repeating patterns were noted that mimicked the previously analyzed transcript(s), while also remaining open to new issues/themes that may have not been present in the first transcript (Smith & Osborn, 2003). During this stage it was important to "respect convergence and divergences in the data" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 73). Once this was completed for each transcript (one-on-one interviews), a final list of overarching themes was compiled. 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. According to Smith and Osborn (2003), within IPA a narrative account occurs when "the analysis becomes expansive again, as the themes are explained, illustrated, and nuanced" (p. 76). The narrative account used in IPA weaves verbatim quotes from the participants with the analyst's interpretation/account; Smith and Osborn (2003) stated that it is important that the researcher clearly distinguish between the words of the participants and the

interpretation by the researcher in the narrative account. Smith and Osborn (2003) highlight the fact that analysis continues throughout the process of *writing up* the themes, as the researcher must continue to interpret the participant experiences in order to accurately translate them into results and discussion. This four-step process of IPA was used to better understand the overarching themes that represent how women experience positive body image while engaging in pole fitness.

Verification Strategies

Verification strategies are used during the process of qualitative research in order to maintain the rigor of the study by ensuring that the research is both reliable and valid (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). These strategies are used throughout the research process in order to identify and correct errors so that they do not become irreversibly built into the research process and subsequently undermine the rest of the study (Morse et al., 2002). This is especially important, as qualitative research requires that the researcher continually assess each component of the study, such as question formulation and data generation strategies (Morse et al., 2002). In conjunction with specific verification strategies, Morse et al. (2002) emphasize that investigator responsiveness is essential to maintaining rigor in a study. This responsiveness requires that the researcher remain open, flexible, and sensitive to necessary changes in the research, and that verification strategies will be modified and changed as required.

Five verification strategies were used throughout this study to maintain rigor. First, in order to ensure that the words and experiences of the participants were being accurately portrayed, this study utilized member checking. In member checking, participants provide their feedback on the credibility of findings and interpretations of

raw data (Creswell, 2013). In the current study, member checking occurred during the follow-up interviews phase of data generation. During the follow-up interviews, I presented the themes that had been identified from the one-on-one interviews in order to ensure that the participants felt that their words were being correctly represented (Mayan, 2009). Second, triangulation of sources was used to provide corroborating evidence for the data gathered (Creswell, 2013). Within this study I engaged in participant observation, and each participant engaged in a one-on-one interview and a follow-up interview. Third, the sample was appropriate to the chosen guiding method (Morse et al., 2002). An appropriate sample is essential for ensuring optimal data saturation, as well as high quality data (Morse et al., 2002). Fourth, the data was generated and analyzed concurrently (Morse et al., 2002). This is an essential aspect of IPA and also allows the researcher to determine the gap between what she or he knows and what still needs to be known. Finally, each decision made throughout the course of the study took into consideration the need for methodological coherence. According to Mayan (2009), methodological coherence involves maintaining congruence through each step of the research. For example, this study ensured that the number of participants recruited was consistent with recommended sample sizes for phenomenological research.

Chapter Three: Results

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to describe and interpret the positive body image experiences of women actively involved in pole fitness. Therefore, participants were asked to speak in-depth about their experiences surrounding their bodies and pole fitness. It is important to note that the majority of the participants were pole fitness instructors and thus have had extensive training in pole fitness. This high level of involvement in pole fitness may have provided a unique perspective that is quite different than the average pole fitness student. My sample, thus, may contribute to a particularly positive experience within pole fitness. The words and experiences of the participants grouped around five superordinate themes: (1) accepting your body as it is, (2) inner confidence, (3) comfort with sexual expression, (4) supportive environment, and (5) appreciating your body's abilities. Each theme begins with a brief description and is followed by direct quotes, written into a narrative account, to support the theme description.

Accepting Your Body As It Is

All participants described the importance of accepting the perceived good and bad aspects of their bodies. This included being forgiving of the perceived "flaws" of their bodies. Several participants identified the diversity of women's bodies in pole fitness as a means to better appreciate their own bodies. Participants also expressed a need to care for their bodies, and emphasized the importance of doing things for their bodies from a positive perspective (e.g., eat healthy foods because you want to provide your body with nutrition, not because you hate your body and want to lose weight).

Participants explained the importance of accepting their bodies as they were, and

the role that pole fitness plays in this process. In some cases, participants shared that pole fitness had further solidified their body acceptance. For example Olive, when talking about taking a pole fitness course, stated:

> I've always been really comfortable with my body. Like, I'm really confident, 'cause it ain't changing, it ain't going nowhere, why not love it? So I guess it [pole fitness] just kind of reinforced that and just… reinforced everything that I'd already thought about it.

While some participants discussed the solidification of body acceptance as a result of pole fitness, others spoke about the role pole fitness played in the development of acceptance for perceived flaws. Lola shared that, similarly to Olive, pole fitness helped strengthen her acceptance of her body. However, unlike Olive, Lola also indicated that pole fitness played a significant role in learning to accept all parts of her body, including perceived flaws. Lola stated that:

> The way I see myself now and how I saw myself then is like a total 180. Yeah, it [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. And then when you hear it in your classes, you start to hear it at home,

and you start to hear it yourself. Yeah, for me that's how it's been.

Lola described how pole fitness has enabled her to perceive physical flaws in a new light, interpreting them within a positive framework. Nikita explained that she is forgiving of perceived flaws and said, "I am far more forgiving, when it comes down to 'oh darn, I don't quite have the washboard abs that I really want or see in the magazines.'" This sentiment was echoed by Athena, who stated:

> 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 that 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?

In addition to an overall acceptance of perceived flaws, participants also discussed learning to love the shape of their bodies. Scarlett discussed the process of learning to love her curvy body through participation in pole fitness. Anastasia also shared that her involvement in pole fitness has altered how she thinks and feels about the shape of her body, stating:

> Definitely yes, there's a big difference. And yeah, I think that, the biggest thing is acceptance. You know I used to joke, being a hockey player and stuff I don't have very little thighs <laughter>, and I am very much more of an athletic build that's not a very curvy woman shape, per say. But now I jokingly refer to my thighs as my powerhouses <laughter> … I don't worry so much about the shape, etc. of what I look like, it's probably for a reason, because it helps me to get somewhere.

Participants described how involvement in pole fitness helped them to accept their bodies

as they are, regardless of the perception of flaws. Physical imperfections that were previously viewed in a negative light were reevaluated and placed within a positive framework in which participants recognized their own beauty.

Participants spoke about the diversity of women's bodies in pole fitness, and expressed that this was an important aspect of learning to accept and appreciate their own bodies. Roxy discussed becoming more comfortable with her body being visible, due to the wide range of body types that women involved in pole fitness have:

> 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.

Nikita, who had previous involvement in dance, explained the challenges she faced as a result of not having a typical dance body. She specifically highlighted that previous dance classes were exclusive to specific body types, and that pole fitness was more inclusive of many body types. Nikita stated:

> And it [pole fitness] became something that, you know, not only skinny girls can do. I had prior dance experience amounting up to, I believe it was four years, and at my level and at my age I was unable to progress any further because the other ladies in my class had started so much younger and were a different body type than me, so if you weren't in that select group you weren't chosen to perform on

> stage, go on point, that kind of thing. Whereas pole is much more inclusionary. And regardless of what your body size is, as opposed to the strength that leads you through the moves and so then, as you probably know yourself, it becomes less about "oh, how do I look in the mirror" and it becomes more about "look what I can do." So that's largely the reason as to why I've stuck with it. Something that everyone can do, and the community is badass.

Being a part of a community that is welcoming to a wide variety of body types was an important component of participants learning to accept their own bodies. This was especially evident in Roxy's explanation of learning to be comfortable with her body being visible.

Several participants expressed that it is important to love and care for the body that you have, and that it is crucial that this love and care comes from a place of positivity. Anastasia discussed experiencing positive body image and emphasized that caring for your body requires positive intentions. She shared:

> Positive body image for me would, just being comfortable in your own skin, which sounds pretty simple, but that would be a huge thing. Like the little fitness memes and stuff you see, and one you see is "work out and do things because you love your body, not because you hate it." And I think that's a big thing of positive body image is just being… being ok with where you are, and what you look like, and doing things from a positive space. Eating to nourish not because you're upset about this, that, and the other, and yeah working out because it makes your body feel good, not because you hate that certain part of your body. And just being comfortable and confident in your skin, no matter where you are.

Lola disclosed that she had struggled from a serious eating disorder and that pole fitness had helped her recover and learn to love her body. She also shared a song that helped express her journey to self-love following this eating disorder.

> I feel like no amount of therapy could have done for me what pole dancing did for me. I was still kind of connecting with myself, I wasn't completely, I wasn't where I am today. I was still kind of on the path, but being very aware that there was this new person inside of me that I was really enjoying getting to know. And then this song came on the radio one day, and I was just kind of bopping along to it, and I was like "this is my mantra," this is not really a pole song, it's "Groove Is In the Heart" by Dee Lite. Because that's just when, um, oh I might cry. For a long time I didn't love myself, with the eating disorder and all that twistedness that goes with it, it was very dark and I wasn't able to love me. And kind of through that journey I was like, "yeah, I do love myself and I love getting to know this new person and the groove is in my heart."

Pole fitness was described as a means by which participants learned to love their bodies. This self-love was identified as a component of positive body image, which requires you to care for your body from a place of positivity.

According to participants, pole fitness is a means by which women learn to accept their bodies as they are. The inclusivity of pole fitness, in which different body types are accepted, was identified as an important aspect of learning to accept your body. Pole fitness was also discussed as a way to love and care for the body.

Inner Confidence

Participants explained that involvement in pole fitness had helped them develop

self-confidence that came from within, instead of being contingent on others. Multiple participants shared that body confidence had extended to confidence in other areas of their life. Participants also described that their sense of inner confidence was outwardly visible, and was often explained in terms of walking taller with shoulders back and down.

Many participants shared that pole fitness had helped them develop and experience inner confidence that comes from within instead of being reliant of the opinions of other people. Olive discussed the confidence that occurs when you gain the power to dictate how you feel about yourself, stating:

> You're kind of placing the power in how you feel in yourself and not other people. And, like I said before, it 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, I know I can do this, I don't need other people around." And then it also increases positive body image because, as I said, you get comfortable with who you are, so then you kind of move on and get out of the head space of not having to rely on other people to tell you're pretty, right? Or tell you that you're sexually attractive or anything, because you get ok with everything that's going on.

Although pole fitness occurs in a group environment, based on my observations each participant focuses individually on learning skills or dance moves. For example, although all the women are learning the spin at the same time, each participant is working on the spin by herself, at her own pace. This allows for an environment that, according to the participants in this study, allows each woman to develop her own inner confidence,

regardless of the other women present. In the case of Olive, she expressed learning to feel confident not only in her body, but also in her ability to sexually express herself, independent of the other women in the class.

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." This sentiment reflected the idea that, according to Anastasia, you sometimes have to fake body confidence while developing actual confidence in your body. Like Olive, Anastasia shared that pole fitness had helped her be comfortable with her body, regardless of the presence of other people:

> 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!" You pretty quickly are just like "I could wander my hands right now in this place and it wouldn't even effect my little brain anymore." 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.

Unlike Olive, Anastasia expressed that learning to be confident in herself, regardless of the presence of other women, was a process that was initially uncomfortable. This may suggest that pole fitness challenges the comfort level of women who choose to participate, and may further reflect that pole fitness is not always an entirely positive experience. However, in the case of participants in this study, this initial discomfort passed, leading to the development of inner confidence. As previously stated, the majority of participants in this study were pole fitness instructors who were already

skilled and thus, confident with their bodies.

In addition to gaining confidence in their bodies, participants also detailed what they believed to be their source of inner confidence. For example, Lola discussed the process of becoming connected with her inner, true, self when she started pole fitness:

> It actually in a weird kind of a way, it makes me feel just more connected with myself. And I could go into depth about that probably, but I kind of felt as I started pole dancing there was this new person inside of me. And I was, during the classes, I was starting to get to know this new person, and I still feel like when I'm pole dancing, whether I'm teaching, whether I'm doing it at home, whether I'm at the studio, or even watching videos on it, I just feel more connected to this other person inside of me.

Participants described how inner confidence was developed through the power they had in deciding, regardless of the opinions of others, that they were beautiful and sexy. Pole fitness was described as means by which women can connect to their true selves.

Participants shared that the self-confidence they had initially developed in their bodies eventually extended to other areas of their lives. Olive stated: "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, sharing:

> 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 a dance floor. I feel so much better about who I am and I care less about what other people think.

Anastasia also expressed this sentiment and discussed how it had motivated her to become an instructor in order to help other women experience the same positive life changes:

> That's why I started teaching, I really appreciated what it did in all aspects of my life and it just, like I say confidence and body image, and that just moved to confidence overall, and I have a much higher level of confidence now. And so, noticing that kind of change I wanted to really share that with other women.

Participants described how the confidence they felt in their bodies eventually became a part of other areas of their lives. In several cases this led to a desire to help women experience this same level of body confidence.

Participants explained that feelings of inner confidence became outwardly visible, often focusing on the changes in how they carried themselves in everyday life. 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 mean I'm a fast walker but… I don't run past and worry

about if people are looking anymore, 'cause it they are they are, it's not really representative of me in any way, shape, or form, that's their own issues, whether it's positive or negative looking. So that would be a very big change I've noticed, I don't worry so much about what other people are thinking anymore.

The words of the participants suggest that inner confidence is developed as women learn to rely on themselves instead of others for acceptance and appreciation of themselves and their bodies. It was shared that this confidence extends to other areas of life, and that it is often noticeable in a woman's outward appearance, particularly in the way that she carries herself.

Comfort with Sexual Expression

All participants described learning to feel more comfortable with sexual expression. Participants shared the importance of having the power to decide what they wanted to do with their bodies, as well as the value of being in touch with their bodies as a means of recognizing that they were sexual beings. Many participants also explained that sexiness is a state of mind, and that it's ok to express yourself sexually regardless of social taboos surrounding women's sexuality.

Participants shared that they had become more comfortable with sexuality and sexual expression in a variety of contexts, whether it be in pole fitness class, alone, or with a partner. Roxy highlighted that pole fitness is associated with sexuality, saying, "First of all, yes – there is a sexual stereotype with pole dancing. And that's completely fine!" Olive explained that the sexual component of pole fitness class had helped her become more comfortable with feeling and acting sexy. She stated, "I'm definitely more confident in knowing I'm sexy. And being able to do things that would be considered

sexy. I've gotten a lot more comfortable with sexiness because of it." 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 preconceived 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, and I think even the idea of that is very, like it's a very quiet subject. I don't even go over to my friend's place and talk about sex, talk about anything like that, right? I find that a lot of it is very hush-hush, and I think this 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?

Pole fitness was described as facilitating a safe environment in which women could explore their sexual side. Participants explained that this exploration translated into greater comfort with sexual expression.

Participants described that comfort with sexual expression isn't instantaneous; instead, it's a process that takes time. Lola described this process in terms of forming a new habit, "I didn't get it right away, it took time. It just took time. It's like, um, it takes 21 days to create a new habit, and it's so true." She further stated:

> I eventually ended up getting my own pole at home, and then over I don't know how long a period of time it was, but I found myself walking a little straighter

> with my shoulders down and back, and pushing what I have of a booty behind me, and just owning my body. Yeah, it took time.

Lola also shared that she felt sexy doing everyday activities such as brushing her teeth. However, Lola was unique in expressing the feeling that comfort with sexual expression had extended to other areas of her life. This might suggest that the comfort is confined to pole fitness.

Anastasia reiterated that becoming comfortable with sexual expression is a process. This process was described as initially uncomfortable, which may be a result of the social taboos, identified by participants in this study, surrounding female sexuality. The participants' words surrounding social taboos will be presented in more detail at a later point in this chapter. Anastasia explained the process she underwent while learning to be comfortable with sexual expression, saying:

> 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 the class, I've found it's really good to push those boundaries with myself and get more comfortable with myself that way. When I'm teaching, 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].

While pole fitness provides an environment that facilitates comfort in sexual expression, this comfort does not necessarily occur instantly. Comfort with sexual expression takes time, and results from spending time getting to know and embrace your body and

sexuality.

Participants discussed that it is important to have the power to choose what you want to do with your body, and also explored the significance of being in touch with your body in order to see yourself as a sexual being. Anastasia stated "It's my body, It's what I want to do!" Scarlett explained that she had discovered how important it was to be in touch with her own body in order to take control of your sexuality:

> I grew up super conservative, Christian, sheltered, like I was a super late bloomer with anything sexual. So, that whole side of it, really getting in touch with your body is such a huge, huge thing that I think not a lot of women really realize. But when you start to be more comfortable with it [sexual expression], I feel it translates a lot to your personal sexual life too.

Participants spoke about the sense of control they had of their own bodies and sexuality, and talked about the role that music has in emphasizing this. Both Roxy and Olive shared the role of music in emphasizing the sense of control they had of their own bodies and sexuality. Roxy said: "'Earned It,' and 'Often' by The Weeknd make me feel gloriously sexy. It makes me feel in control of my own sexuality!" Olive echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that certain songs, specifically "Cherry Pie" by Warrant, make her feel in control of who receives her attention:

> 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 in yourself. … 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?

In addition to overall comfort in sexual expression, participants argued that pole fitness also contributes to a sense of connection to oneself as a sexual being. Participants argued that many women do not feel in control of their own sexuality, and highlighted that pole fitness allows them to feel this sense of control that may be otherwise lacking.

Participants explained that being sexy is something that is just for themselves, and that regardless of social restrictions surrounding women's sexuality it's ok to express yourself sexually. Roxy discussed feeling sexy just for herself, and stated:

> When I free-dance on the pole by myself with nobody else in the room, I am able to explore my sexuality through dance and exotic movement for myself. It makes me feel strong knowing that I am capable of such movement with grace, power, and sexuality.

Olive also shared that she felt she was being sexy just for herself. Unlike Roxy, however, she expressed this in terms of the group environment provided by pole fitness:

> It makes you more comfortable in your sexuality 'cause, you're like "I only do sexy things for my boyfriend or my girlfriend, or like my partner, like I only do sexy things for them, I don't want to do sexy things in a room in front of strangers – don't know about that." And then once you get into it makes you more comfortable in your sexuality because it's like, this is a bunch of chicks in one room, being sexy for no one but themselves, and that's ok, this is happening!

The differences in the experiences of Olive and Roxy may suggest several things. Olive discussed the presence of other people in the context of comfort with sexual expression. This may indicate that she requires others, in some way, to bolster her feelings of sexiness. Conversely, as Roxy spoke about feeling sexy and exploring her sexuality when

she was alone, this may suggest that she truly felt comfortable with sexual expression. However, it is also possible that as Roxy has been involved in pole fitness for a longer period of time than Olive, she is simply comfortable with sexual expression in a wider variety of contexts. Regardless of the context in which participants discussed feeling comfortable with sexual expression, the words of the participants suggest that pole fitness was responsible, in some part, for aiding them in developing comfort with sexual expression. Pole fitness was discussed as a means to engage in sexual expression for the self, without the pressure of being sexual for somebody else.

Several participants discussed the idea that society generally discounts women as sexual beings. Athena explained that it's ok to be sexual even though society has a stance that women shouldn't be sexually expressive:

> People think that they [women] shouldn't be like that, or a woman shouldn't be sexual, and I don't think that there's anything wrong with that. There's really nothing wrong with a woman being proud of her body and being proud of what she can do, and what she has.

Several participants specifically addressed the idea that pole fitness provides a safe space in which women can express themselves sexually without fear of being judged for stepping outside of existing social taboos surrounding female sexuality. Terms like "protected" and "safe" were used in these descriptions, which seems to speak to a belief that it is not safe for women to express themselves sexually in the current social climate. One participant, Lola, discussed the sexual assault of girls and women in conjunction with social taboos on female sexuality, further reinforcing the idea that society is not open to female expressions of sexuality. Nikita also focused on the fact that pole fitness

allows an opportunity to express one's sexuality without fear of being judged for breaking social taboos:

> 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 often times female sexuality can be seen as taboo.

Lola explored the fear that some women may have about being sexual, and stated:

> There's still all this, and this might be off on a little tangent here, but there's still all this controversy in our society, that if a young girl is sexually assaulted, some people will still think well, she was dressed too sexy, and she deserved it. And, I think for women, you kind of wanna keep that sensual part of you closed in, you don't wanna let it out because of how certain people in society are gonna take that. If you feel it on the inside it's ok to let it out.

Participants expressed that, regardless of social expectations, women should be free to be sexually expressive if they so choose. Participants also emphasized that is ok, not shameful, to engage in sexual expression. While participants shared that they had gained greater comfort in sexual expression, this was generally discussed in the context of pole fitness or in other "safe" spaces such as at home or with a partner. This may suggest that while pole fitness does provide a helpful avenue by which women can become more comfortable with sexual expression, and with themselves as sexual beings, this comfort may not necessarily extend to more public spaces. As previously discussed, this could potentially be connected to the idea, expressed by participants, that social taboos on female sexuality may make expressing one's self in a public setting unsafe.

Comfort with sexual expression was identified as a result of involvement in pole fitness, and it was noted that this comfort takes time to develop. Participants discussed the importance of being in control of their sexuality, and emphasized that it's ok to express yourself sexually even though society has placed taboos around female sexuality.

Supportive Environment

All participants expressed that pole fitness creates a supportive and judgment-free environment. Specifically, participants revealed that pole fitness is an inclusive environment where women of all shapes, sizes, and ages are welcomed and in which women are never critical of other women's bodies. Participants also explained that hearing other women being positive about their bodies translated into learning to be positive about their bodies as well.

Participants discussed the supportive environment that pole fitness offers, often focusing on the idea that pole fitness can be initially uncomfortable and the support of other women makes the class less awkward. Olive explained the general atmosphere of pole fitness:

> [Pole fitness] is mostly just the atmosphere because if the other girls in the class weren't welcoming and open to it, then you wouldn't be as comfortable and you wouldn't get the results that you're wanting to get from it. Definitely, the atmosphere.

Anastasia also discussed the idea that pole fitness is initially awkward, and explored how this can foster strong connections between women:

> I think it's nice, 'cause it really puts us all on the same level, and everyone is feeling equally awkward, we just met, wandering their hands, and you're like

> "this is a fitness class, this isn't what I'm here for." But I think it's all part of it or else you would just go to a regular fitness class. If I wanted to just get stronger I would just go to the gym, 'cause that works just as well. But it's completely different when you're in a group of people, so you're all going through this really awkward phase together, and it's nice 'cause I've found it really starts to foster some really great connections from a place of being vulnerable. I'd say it feels campy and cheesy, but I think it's all part of it, of pushing past that.

Participants discussed the importance of fostering connections with other women. These connections helped participants become more comfortable in pole fitness, particularly in the initial stages of learning more sexual moves (e.g., wandering hands).

The participants spoke extensively about the support and lack of judgment that is found in pole fitness. 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." She further stated:

> 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, or a lot of people would never do in a regular gym, but there's no judgment there. 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.

Participants spoke to the unique complementary environment of pole fitness, in which women lift each other up instead of tearing each other down. Lola stated:

> And, with pole in particular, there's nothing more intimidating than getting a group together scantily dressed in these tiny little shorts and sports bras, putting them all in a room together, and actually having them support you and tell you that you're beautiful and compliment you and lift you up, rather than walking into a room and having people not talk to you, or turn the other way, or be rude. It's a community that I found that helps you explore non-judgmental body image.

Athena further explored the openness and warmth of pole fitness. She emphasized that because women are already critical of themselves, criticism from others is not beneficial. She added that understanding other women's background is important when maintaining a supportive environment:

> 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.

Scarlett also spoke about the importance of having women be complimentary instead of critical and further emphasized that the community aspect is one of the most important aspects of involvement in pole fitness:

> I just thought I was normal, but I didn't think I was anything special. I don't know that I appreciated my body as much as I do now. And a lot of that too, I think, is not only the pole dancing itself but the girls, especially that I've taught with and even taking classes with girls. The things that they said about you and your body really went a long way. … It's a combination of the community aspect of that and the other girls, and I don't wanna say it had nothing to do with the exercise, 'cause it totally did, but I dunno. There's a lot working together that I think makes it kinda special.

While the exercise components of pole fitness are important, participants also highlighted that the supportive environment provided by pole fitness is as critical, if not more so, than the exercise itself. Pole fitness provides a unique environment in which women are supportive and complimentary instead of judgmental. Participants emphasized the warm, welcoming aspect of pole fitness which is inclusive of women of all shapes and sizes.

Participants discussed the impact of hearing other women be positive about their bodies; specifically, they discussed how it taught them to develop a positive perspective about their own bodies. Scarlett explained the role of instructors in helping reduce negative self-talk and explained how she prevents it:

> Especially teaching, because, that was 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. The second that some girl starts saying something negative about herself I'm the first person to shut it down. 'Cause you start thinking about what you're saying to yourself, and it makes a big difference, right? … And especially my confidence too, especially when I started

> instructing, because you don't realize how much the girls are like little babies that look up to you and they just think you're the greatest thing ever. When you see how they look at you, it makes you look at yourself differently too. You know what I mean? So you move your hip one way and they're like "oh my god, you're so good at doing that" and I'm like, you just move your hip! Yeah, it's been super cool.

Scarlett explored the idea that other women looked up to her as role model, and further explored how this had made her consider herself in a new light. Through other women's appreciation for her body, Scarlett learned to see herself and her body in a more positive light. However, it may also be that Scarlett required some level of external validation from her students in order to feel supportive and comfortable in her body. This could suggest that the social support found in pole fitness may act as a sort of buttress in the absence of internal acceptance and appreciation of one's body. Lola talked about her personal transformation from negative to positive body self-talk, highlighting the importance of other women in that process:

> 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. It was the opposite, and sometimes that's startling a little bit. It takes you aback a little bit and then even if I did something that wasn't the nicest looking on the pole, the instructor when I was there, and the girls that I was with, they might not comment on the part of my spin or whatever I was doing, maybe I didn't point my toes and it didn't look good, but they would find something else. It was always compliments, it was never really negative. And

> then, it just spilled over when I would be doing things at home. I just got a little bit prouder and I started walking a little taller, and just started to feel this connectedness that I had been searching for and never really found it? And your cup flows over and the things that I would say, you know how we are to ourselves, when you're saying negative things to yourself, you believe them. And then when you flip that around and start saying these positive things to yourself you believe them. It's really powerful.

While remaining supportive is an important aspect of pole fitness, as expressed by Lola, it is worthwhile to mention that instructors do still help correct form in terms of both skill and dance. For example, if a student is struggling to learn a spin, the instructor will work to correct the student's form in order to improve skill, but this correction is always framed in encouraging terms. As a result, skills are taught in a supportive manner without criticism. In terms of learning "sexy" moves, participants are free to decide the extent to which they would like to engage in those activities. As emphasized by Roxy in a follow-up interview, each woman who engages in pole fitness can choose the extent to which she learns more sexually expressive movements without worrying about being criticized by other students or instructors. Pole fitness, for my participants, provided a supportive, inclusive environment free of judgment. The positivity afforded by the atmosphere of pole fitness, as well as the active role women take in lifting each other up, supports the formation of positive body image.

Appreciating Your Body's Abilities

Participants described the focus of pole fitness as being on skill/ability development, not on appearance. Skill development occurs in many forms in pole fitness.

For example, strength exercises (e.g., Pilates inspired push-ups) are learned during floor work, dance moves are learned to connect moves on the pole, and a variety of spins are learned on the pole. Participants further described learning to be proud of their bodies and what they could accomplish as they overcame obstacles to do things they never felt possible. Appreciating what your body can do for you was a sentiment expressed by many participants, as was the outlook that it is empowering to know that your body is responsible for increased skill, confidence, and strength.

Participants explained that pole fitness is about mastering skills, 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:

> All of the girls were a lot of different sizes. And it seemed like what you were learning and how to control your body had nothing to do with how you were made, essentially. We had that one girl, who has two kids, and she could move her hips better than I can. Right? So it's just kind of like they [the instructors] never really doubted you. If you were a little heavier, and not as muscly, they never doubted that you wouldn't be able to do something. They just encouraged you and made you feel like you could do it. Or if you were super skinny and you were like a little stick, they were like "no you can do this, we'll help you, we'll show you" kind of deal. They made you comfortable and confident in yourself. Participants described the feeling of pride they had in their bodies when they

overcame challenges they faced in pole fitness. Roxy explained her feelings of pride, saying, “I feel proud of myself for accomplishing new moves that I never thought I could ever do… especially with having no dance or gymnastic background.” Roxy also shared:

> The second tool of empowerment is how it has challenged my body. I am an artistic person, but I never took dance or gymnastics as a child. Therefore, there aren’t many “adult” dance or gymnastics programs around… any exciting ones at least. Pole has given me the ability to express myself artistically. Being able to do moves that I *never* thought were possible, is another amazing feeling. And I encourage women that *everybody* can do it, because I am just like every other woman.

The sentiment expressed by Roxy that anyone can do pole fitness, and that pole fitness provided an avenue to accomplish things that she never felt possible shares certain parallels with other forms of exercise and dance. However, as expressed by Nikita (and shared previously in this chapter), other forms of dance may also provide specific barriers if a woman does not have a previous levels of experience or a specific body type. Nikita specifically shared her own experience in ballet, in which she was eventually forced to quit as she could no longer keep up with other dancers due to her body type and skill level. She then expressed that beginning pole fitness was an entirely different experience, in which she could develop skills regardless of a lack of previous experience or a specific body type. This may suggest that pole fitness provides a unique avenue by which women can challenge themselves and learn to appreciate their bodily capabilities.

Anastasia expressed the pride she feels in her body when tackling pole moves:

> And then with my body, like I say it's always great when you can add 5 pounds on when you're doing the weightlift, it's a complete different thing when you nail a trick, and you're just so proud of what your body can accomplish, and you know it's from the strength and dedication that you've put in. I just found I always leave very proud of what my body is capable of.

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." Pole fitness was described as focusing on skill and ability rather than appearance. Participants highlighted their feelings of pride in their bodies that accompanied learning new skills.

Participants shared that pole fitness had helped them develop an appreciation of what their bodies could do for them. Roxy said: "I have learned to appreciate my body for the awesome things that it has been able to accomplish, instead of picking it apart and hating on it." Anastasia shared a similar sentiment, stating, "I personally, I immediately just kinda fell in love with what people's bodies could actually be capable of." Nikita discussed how rewarding it is to see your body and skill set develop as you participate in pole fitness:

> And then, as a whole, 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 incredibly 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.

Nikita further described her appreciation of her body by using an example of a specific skill, saying, “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!’ In this particular case, the move described requires a relatively high skill level. Again, as previously discussed the majority of the participants are also instructors, which provides them a more advanced skill base. However, participants continually highlighted that with time and practice, they believed that anybody can accomplish a wide variety of pole fitness skills. Scarlett discussed the confidence that comes from knowing what your body can do:

> 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 detailed that, as a result of pole fitness, they had developed greater body strength. Several participants described this development in terms of muscle development, although this was also discussed more generally in terms of changes in the

body. As pole fitness is heavily strength-based (e.g., spinning on the pole requires upper body strength to develop momentum), it is perhaps unsurprising that participants would share these specific body changes. Participants such as Athena explained that visible bodily changes, such as more pronounced muscles, were a way of better appreciating their bodies' abilities. Athena detailed the experience of learning your own strength, and the body appreciation that stems from that experience:

> I noticed that a lot of the muscles in my back were more pronounced, and I think it kind of gives you a sense of you're stronger than you actually think you are. When we do pole parties, or one class you hold yourself up on the pole your first class. And I think it's very empowering because it gives you that sense that you are much stronger, and much better than you would automatically assume yourself to be. … I find that pole's really good for that too, it kinda gets rid of that self-doubt and that negativity that you kind of had, and those stereotypes that you have about yourself and what you can do, so that's really cool. I think it just goes to show you what you can really do.

Participants emphasized that pole fitness taught them to appreciate what their bodies could do for them. Participants also discussed the feelings of confidence and empowerment that stemmed from knowing that their bodies were the reason they could successfully learn challenging moves.

Pole fitness provides women the opportunity to develop an appreciation of their bodies by emphasizing skill mastery over appearance. 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 can do for them.

Chapter Four: Discussion

Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) have suggested that their six-part definition of positive body image can provide mental health professionals with a basis for negative body image prevention and positive body image promotion. It also provides a general set of components (e.g., emphasizing body's assets) that can be targeted in positive body image interventions. However, this definition does not identify specific contexts in which positive body image may be experienced. This research, thus, makes a significant contribution to the literature by providing an understanding of a specific context in which women can experience positive body image. By understanding *specific* contexts in which positive body image is experienced, such as pole fitness, researchers can better identify salient features and experiences that need to be incorporated into positive body image interventions. This research highlights that pole fitness may be an avenue by which women can develop and maintain positive body image.

It is important to emphasize that my interview guide did not include any questions that mimicked the definition of positive body image, yet the experiences shared by participants echoed the definition set forth by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010). Specifically, the findings of this research closely mirror three of the six components of positive body image encompassed by Wood-Barcalow et al.'s (2010) definition: a) appreciation of the functions the body can perform, b) acceptance of all aspects of the body, and c) feeling confident about the body. Additionally, the experiences of the participants reflected an antecedent and maintenance factor of positive body image, unconditional support of significant others, and as a consequence of positive body image, caring for the body through healthy behaviours (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). The close link between the

words of the participants and the definition set forth by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) may indicate that positive body image is experienced in pole fitness. I now discuss how each of the three aspects of Wood-Barcalow et al.'s definition of positive body image were present in my data.

This research highlights that pole fitness enables women to focus on skill and ability, which, according to the participants, translates into an appreciation of the body's abilities. This finding is consistent with the definition of positive body image set forth by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010), which states that positive body image involves an appreciation of the functions that the body can perform. Body appreciation is one of the key components of positive body image that can be assessed with empirical measures, specifically through the use of the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) developed by Avalos et al. (2005). Recently, the BAS was updated and re-evaluated, resulting in the psychometrically sound BAS-2 (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). This update was designed to include measurements of current conceptualizations of positive body image, such as those posited by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010). Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) emphasized that the BAS-2 is meant to be broad so that respondents can choose how to apply the scale to their bodies (e.g., appearance, function), but also recognized that future research should account for the specific ways in which respondents are using the scale to evaluate their bodies. Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) specifically highlighted that "whether they were also considering the functioning and health of their bodies has yet to be determined" (p. 65), and further indicated that a question focusing on the appreciation of the body's functions was ultimately excluded from the BAS-2. Findings from this research suggest that an appreciation of the body's abilities is an important component of

positive body image. Therefore, future measurements of body appreciation (or a more broad measurement of positive body image) should consider including questions surrounding body functionality.

Participants, when discussing their experiences in pole fitness, stressed the importance of accepting both the good and bad aspects of their bodies. This is consistent with Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010), who identified acceptance of all aspects of the body as an important component of positive body image. An important consequence of positive body image is that individuals care for their bodies by engaging in healthy behaviours, such as eating healthy foods or exercising (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). This was evident in participants who spoke about the importance of caring for your body from a place of positivity, such as working out because it makes your body feel good. These findings suggest that not only is pole fitness an avenue that may promote body acceptance, but it may also be an avenue by which women learn to engage in healthy behaviours as a result of loving and caring for all facets of their bodies.

Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) have identified "unconditional acceptance from significant others" (p. 112) as an antecedent and maintenance factor for positive body image. Participants in this study discussed pole fitness as a means for developing close relationships with other women, and thus pole fitness was an avenue for creating a network of significant others. In addition to the creation of social networks, this research highlighted that pole fitness also provides a supportive, non-judgmental environment, and this supportive environment helped participants in the development of positive body image. The identification of pole fitness as a non-judgmental environment in which women are warm and accepting, regardless of body size and shape, is consistent with

Wood-Barcalow et al.'s (2010) findings that highlight the idea that "a positive body image would be fostered by an atmosphere of respect, appreciation, and tolerance for the diversity of weights and shapes" (p. 111). This research also substantiates findings that suggest women are especially likely to participate in types of physical activity that offer social support (e.g., Henderson, 2003). This suggests that since women are already drawn to physical activity that involves social support, interventions to promote positive body image should utilize activities such as pole fitness, that have been identified as being particularly supportive, welcoming, and non-judgmental, in order to provide an ideal environment for positive body image development.

This research suggests that a benefit of pole fitness is the development of inner confidence that begins with the body and extends to other areas of life. This confidence comes from within and is not contingent upon the approval of others. These findings echo Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) who highlight that an important aspect of positive body image is not only feeling confidence in the body, but also experiencing an outward reflection of this confidence (e.g., outer radiance). These findings also tie into existing research on self-esteem and contingencies of self-worth (e.g., Crocker & Knight, 2005; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Noser & Ziegler-Hill, 2014). Global self-esteem is an overall assessment of self-worth (Noser & Ziegler-Hill, 2014), and contingencies of self-worth represent a particular approach to self-esteem research, 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). Contingencies of self-worth may be internal or external, and Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003) suggest 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 as opposed to unstable external contingencies such as the conditional approval of others.

Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) suggest that frequent body-related compliments are not associated with positive body image, and are associated with body dissatisfaction and dysfunctional appearance investment. This suggests that positive body image is, in some part, associated with non-contingent self-worth. However, research on positive body image also suggests that positive body image is associated with subjective perception of body acceptance by significant others (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015), which may indicate that positive body image is not completely bereft of contingent self-worth. Although positive body image may be dependent on some level of contingent self-worth, it is important to note that this contingent self-worth is based on body acceptance, not judgment-based assessments of appearance (e.g., compliments and criticisms). In other words, positive body image may be contingent upon unconditional acceptance. Crocker et al. (2003) have highlighted that while psychological well-being is associated with contingencies that are attached to intrinsic features of the self, it is also associated with external contingencies that are "relatively unconditional" (p. 895). Thus, positive body image may be associated with both contingent and non-contingent self-worth.

Participants described learning to be confident in their bodies independent of other people, suggesting that they experienced development of non-contingent self-worth. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) have highlighted that women are evaluated based on their appearance, and this has far reaching implications in terms of both self-evaluation and evaluation by others, to the point that "significant portions of women's conscious attention can often be usurped by concerns related to real or imagined, present or

anticipated, surveyors of their physical appearance" (p. 180). This may result in self-worth being contingent on both appearance and approval of that appearance from generalized others (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003). Participants shared experiences of worrying about what other people were thinking about their bodies and their overall self, which may indicate self-worth evaluations contingent upon appearance and generalized others. Participants then argued that as a result of pole fitness they had stopped caring about what others thought, which suggests a shift to non-contingent self-worth in which self-worth is not dependent on external reinforcement (Noser & Ziegler-Hill, 2014). Participants also shared the importance of unconditional body acceptance by other women in pole fitness as playing a key role in learning to accept and be confident in their own bodies, suggesting a certain level of contingent self-worth based on body acceptance by significant others. These research findings indicate that pole fitness may provide an environment in which women develop an inner sense of self-worth, and further suggest that positive body image interventions may be strengthened by incorporating tasks that strengthen psychologically beneficial forms of contingent and non-contingent self-worth.

The definition of positive body image provided by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) is comprehensive and is consistent with the majority of themes that emerged from this study. However, the finding that pole fitness facilitates comfort with sexual expression is not a cohesive fit within this definition. Consequently, this finding will be explored within literature on sexuality, particularly literature surrounding women and self-sexualization (e.g., Smolak, Murnen, & Meyers, 2014). In addition, this finding will be situated within existing literature on pole fitness, which often explores questions of

female sexuality (e.g., Donaghue et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2010; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). As a broad activity, pole dancing (under which pole fitness falls) has been constructed as an extreme form of self-sexualizing behaviour that is gendered, relatively infrequent, and socially unacceptable (e.g., Nowatzki & Morry, 2009; Smolak et al., 2014). Although participation in activities such as pole fitness can be discussed in terms of female sexual agency, some feminist theorists (e.g., Gill, 2008) have argued that the sexualization of women is not indicative of sexual agency but is instead another form of oppression in which women are allowed to "choose" whether or not to be sexualized. This sentiment has been specifically explored in relation to pole fitness (e.g., Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). Furthermore, the sexualization and self-sexualization of women has highlighted a number of potential negative effects, including the suggestion that self-sexualization may result in disregard for subjective experiences of sexuality (Nowatzki & Morry, 2009). The results of this research may highlight some inconsistencies with this understanding of self-sexualization, and suggest that pole fitness, a form of self-sexualization, helps women to feel a sense of control over their bodies while also providing an opportunity to recognize themselves as sexual beings. It is important to note, however, that these experiences, for the most part, occurred within the safe confines of a pole fitness class. This is perhaps not surprising, as the women in this study specifically addressed the idea that society has placed oppressive taboos on women's sexuality. The sentiment expressed by the participants regarding social taboos mimics Attwood (2007) who states, "…women engage with a culture that frequently reduces them to their sexual value whilst ignoring their sexuality" (p. 233).

Participants emphasized that pole fitness has helped them recognize the

importance of connecting with, and having control over, their bodies. This finding is consistent with existing research on activities similar to pole fitness, such as recreational burlesque (Regehr, 2012) and belly dancing (e.g., Moe, 2012). Participants in this research shared that pole fitness allows them to recognize themselves as sexual beings. Furthermore, participants emphasized that pole fitness allows them to become more comfortable with sexual expression, regardless of social taboos surrounding women's sexuality. While concerns that pole fitness, as a self-sexualizing behaviour, may reduce women to their sexual value might have some validity, it is important to note that pole fitness does *not* ignore women's sexuality. Instead, as argued by my participants, pole fitness provides a safe space to engage in sexual expression. This finding suggests that while some forms of self-sexualization may limit experiences of personal sexuality, pole fitness may actually enhance subjective experiences of sexuality.

Findings from this research provide a unique contribution to existing pole fitness literature, particularly in regards to discussions of female sexuality. While this research supports individual experiences of pole fitness that have been identified by previous research, such as an emphasis on skill and body confidence (e.g., Holland, 2010) and feelings of empowerment and liberation (e.g., Whitehead and Kurz, 2010), it extends how these individual experiences have been previously interpreted (e.g., Bahri, 2012; Donaghue et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2010; Whitehead and Kurz, 2009). The majority of existing pole fitness literature has used the individual experiences of women in pole fitness to address larger social questions, often arriving at the conclusion that pole fitness serves to reinforce and perpetuate gender norms regarding female sexuality (e.g., Evans et al., 2010). This finding is consistent with broader discussions of female self-

sexualization (e.g., Nowatzki & Morry, 2009; Smolak et al., 2014). While the results of this study did not explicitly identify alternative forms of female sexuality, they do suggest a different way of conceptualizing how sexuality may impact women. The findings of this study suggest that self-sexualization within the context of pole fitness may in fact be beneficial to 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 sexualizing and objectifying women. Regehr (2012) has highlighted that although sexuality, particularly in regards to women, is complex, it is important to focus on ways to help ensure women have access to sexual agency, health, and exploration. As argued by Lerum and Dworkin (2009), while it is crucial that researchers continue to address the impact of sexualization on women, it is equally critical to provide "space for sexual rights" (p. 260). Consequently, spaces such as those provided by recreational burlesque, belly dance, and pole fitness may provide safe spaces, away from potential observers, in which women can engage in sexual exploration for themselves (e.g., Moe, 2012; Regehr, 2012; Tiggemann, Coutts, & Clark, 2014).

Findings suggest that pole fitness and similar physical activity, such as belly dance, may be an avenue by which positive body image can be promoted *and* negative body image and related issues can be tempered. When describing their positive body experiences in pole fitness, participants shared that pole fitness helped them to love their bodies. In one particular case, Lola shared that pole fitness had helped her overcome a severe eating disorder. These experiences mirror those found in women who participate in belly dance. Belly dance, like pole fitness, is often conceptualized as erotic and sexually alluring (e.g., Moe, 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2014). Additionally, it has recently

begun to gain mainstream popularity, and is predominantly practiced by women (Moe, 2012). Consequently, it is appropriate to compare pole fitness experiences to belly dancing experiences. Moe (2012) highlighted that women who participate in belly dancing experience healing, which can encompass both physical, emotional, and psychological healing. Generally, belly dance helped women to love their bodies (Moe, 2012), a theme that was present in this study. Additionally, a specific aspect in which women experienced healing was in relation to eating disorders (Moe, 2012), which is similar to this research in which women learned to love their bodies, even in the face of issues such as eating disorders. While pole fitness is not a cure-all for serious disorders, this research, in combination with research on belly dance, may indicate that certain forms of physical activity may have significance for clinical interventions.

Beyond providing context-specific understanding of ways in which positive body image can be experienced, this research also offers unique insights into specific constructs that have informed current knowledge of positive body image. Specifically, this research provides unique insight into body self-compassion and body pride. Body self-compassion, and self-compassion as an overarching concept, may uniquely contribute to the conceptualization of positive body image by highlighting a way in which individuals may cope with negative feelings about their bodies; Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude (2007) found that self-compassion is linked to adaptive psychological functioning, of which positive body image is a part (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Accepting your body as it is is closely linked with a key component of body self-compassion, appreciating one's unique body (Berry et al., 2010). Appreciating one's unique body involves being accepting and appreciative of one's body instead of being

critical (Berry et al., 2010), a sentiment that was expressed by participants of this research. Additionally, participants shared that the diversity of women's bodies in pole fitness helped them to love their own bodies, which mirrors another component of appreciating one's unique body. The close connection between the findings of this research and the research carried out by Berry et al. (2010) suggests that pole fitness may facilitate body self-compassion. Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) recognized that their definition of positive body image might not be complete, and therefore highlighted that additional research may uncover unique components of positive body image that should be included in its conceptualization. The findings of this research suggest that body self-compassion may be an essential feature of positive body image and therefore should be explored as part of the overarching conceptualization of positive body image.

A sense of common humanity, an important component of self-compassion, is related to the importance of a supportive environment that was highlighted by this research. According to Germer and Neff (2013), a sense of common humanity involves understanding that experiences of failure, imperfection, and suffering are not singular experiences, but are actually a normal aspect of the greater human experience. Germer and Neff (2013) state that common humanity involves the recognition that, "We are not alone in our imperfection. Rather, our imperfections are what make us card-carrying members of the human race" (p. 857). This recognition allows people to feel a sense of community, rather than isolation, when they are experiencing any type of suffering or pain (Germer & Neff, 2013). Participants shared that pole fitness had fostered an understanding of women's common experiences (e.g., being self-critical), and emphasized that this was an important reason for pole fitness to provide a safe,

supportive environment. In addition to providing further support to the idea that self-compassion is applicable to the body, this finding seems to indicate that a sense of common humanity plays an integral role in the creation of a supportive, non-judgmental environment, which in turn fosters positive body image. Therefore, it may be advantageous for positive body image interventions to include self-compassion training, such as the mindful self-compassion training developed by Neff and Germer (2012), which, among other things, involves interpersonal exercises meant to develop a sense of common humanity.

Findings from this research also suggest that authentic body pride is an important component of positive body image and that pole fitness is an environment that supports the elicitation and maintenance of feelings of authentic body pride. Participants shared that pole fitness helped them learn to be proud of their bodies as they overcame physical and mental challenges, such as not believing that they were capable of accomplishing certain moves in pole fitness. This finding is consistent with elements of body pride, as conceptualized by Castonguay et al. (2013). Specifically, the experiences of participants in this study align with experiences of authentic body pride. According to Castonguay et al. (2013), authentic body pride, much like authentic pride as conceptualized by Tracy and Robins (e.g., 2004, 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. Therefore, this research suggests that pole fitness elicits feelings of authentic body pride. Furthermore, participants discussed pride in their bodies as a reason for continuing involvement in pole fitness, which is consistent with findings by Castonguay et al. (2013) that suggest that authentic body pride is related to

motivational outcomes (e.g., achievement). Finally, Castonguay et al. (2013) highlighted that body pride is most often elicited in sport and/or exercise contexts, a context which pole fitness provides. Consequently, it may be worthwhile for positive body image interventions to include personal accomplishment oriented exercise in order to foster authentic body pride.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with all research, this study had several limitations. First, all research was conducted through the same pole fitness studio, in which classes are mixture of both fitness (e.g., floor work which incorporated strength-based movements such as modified push-ups) and traditional "sexy" dance moves. Holland (2010) highlighted that there is wide variety in terms of how pole fitness studios structure classes (i.e., whether or not the focus is more on fitness or on dance), and therefore the structure of the class may impact positive body image experiences. Future research should incorporate the experiences of women from a variety of pole fitness backgrounds in order to assess whether or not the focus of pole fitness influences positive body image. Second, as previously mentioned, the majority of participants in this study were pole fitness instructors and they had an ongoing involvement in pole fitness. These in-depth pole fitness experiences may have contributed to a particularly unique perspective that is quite different than those of an average pole fitness student. Future research should include more pole fitness students (at a variety of skill levels) in order to explore the diverse positive body image experiences.

Third, the exploratory nature of this study does not provide an opportunity to make any general claims about the relationship between positive body image and participation in pole fitness. However, the rich stories shared by participants in this study

suggest that women in pole fitness do experience positive body image and future pole fitness research should consider the incorporation of empirical measurements of positive body image, such as the BAS-2 (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). As previously discussed, this measurement may still need adjustment in order to more fully encompass all the unique components of positive body image; however, as the BAS-2 is psychometrically sound, easy to administer, and closely reflects many important aspects of positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015), it may be a useful tool for measuring positive body image within the context of pole fitness. Finally, this research occurred during a short timeline, and required participants to reflect back on their experiences. Future research should consider an ethnographic approach in order to provide a rich, thick description of how positive body image is experienced in real life (Wolcott, 2010). Ethnographic approaches are sensitive to context, real and descriptive, specific (Wolcott, 2010), and typically occur over a long period of time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and therefore provide an ideal framework for understanding positive body image experiences as they occur.

Conclusion

This research suggests that women who are active participants in pole fitness experience positive body image. Beyond merely replicating existing literature on positive body image, this research provides a unique contribution by utilizing context specific data to suggest possible avenues for the development of positive body image interventions (e.g., the inclusion of self-compassion training) as well as suggestions to further develop empirical measures of positive body image (e.g., the inclusion of body functionality to the BAS-2). In addition to findings surrounding positive body image, this

research also highlights that pole fitness may be a means to provide women with a safe space in which they can engage in sexual exploration, which is an important part of supporting the sexual rights of women. This research has provided unique insight into positive body image and pole fitness by exploring the experiences of women. My hope is that this research will provide a starting point for continued research into these fields of study in order to better understand a) the potential benefits of pole fitness, and b) ways in which researchers can aid in facilitating effective, practical avenues to promote positive body image in women.

Positive psychology addresses the need to build upon and enhance positive subjective experiences, positive personal traits, and civic virtues and institutions (Seligman, 2002). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) have identified that positive subjective experiences, which this study addresses, encompass many facets, including well-being, hope, flow, and happiness. By exploring ways to promote positive body image experiences, this study helps to foster positive subjective experiences and the formation of complete well-being. Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) have emphasized that reducing negative body image is an insufficient means of promoting well-being, and that it is crucial to also understand and promote positive body image. This mandate fits within the overarching approach of positive psychology that posits that reducing or removing maladaptive characteristics leads to a lack of vitality, and that the promotion of positive characteristics is necessary to move people towards a state of flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This study, by exploring ways to promote positive body image, therefore contributes to the goal of positive psychology to move people towards a state of flourishing and complete well-being.

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Appendix A

Pole Fitness and Positive Body Image Interview Guide

1. Self-description.
2. Level of experience.
3. Can you explain your reasons for joining a pole fitness class?
4. How does this class make you feel about yourself?
    a. How does this class make you feel about your body?
5. What do you think is the biggest difference in how you feel about your body since joining pole fitness?
    a. Please give me an example.
6. Tell me how you define positive body image. Please be as detailed as possible.
7. Based on the answer you just gave me, can you tell me if you experience positive body image during pole fitness class? If so, how?
8. Do you think pole fitness could be beneficial for positive body image in young women who have never tried this type of class?
9. Previous research has indicated that many women find pole fitness to be "empowering." Discuss your thoughts about this.
    a. How do you think this relates to positive body image and your body?
10. There is a strong emphasis on sexuality/sensuality in pole fitness. How do you think this shapes how you feel and think about your body?
11. Music is an important aspect of pole fitness classes, particularly during the "community pole" component. Tell me about a song that represents how you feel about your body when you are in class.

Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in the study: Pole Fitness and Positive Body Image. The choice to participate in the study is entirely up to you. Your participation is voluntary and is not required by any physical activity or sport program that you may be involved in.

Researchers: The study is being undertaken by Ariel Dimler (dimler@ualberta.ca), a MA student at the University of Alberta in the faculty of Physical Education and Recreation. The study is under the supervision of Dr. Tara-Leigh McHugh (780-492-3907, tara-leigh.mchugh@ualberta.ca), who is an Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta in the faculty of Physical Education and Recreation.

Purpose and Procedures: The purpose of this community-based research is to better understand the experiences of positive body image among women in Edmonton who participate in pole fitness classes. The study will require you to participate in a one-on-one interview and a focus group with approximately 9 other women. The one-on-one interview and focus group will each last approximately 1 hour.

The total time required of you for the study will be 2 hours (one-on-one interview = 1 hour, focus group = 1 hour).

Potential Risks: When participating in a focus group setting, your responses are not confidential, as other people will hear your response so there is a potential for others to repeat information outside of the focus group. However, it is encouraged that each participant follow the guidelines of keeping information said by others in the group to themselves. You do not have to share any information you are uncomfortable sharing with the group. This will be repeated at the beginning of the focus group. You will not be subjected to any physical risk, but it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable discussing your positive body image experiences. In the event that you would like the support of a health professional you may contact the 24-hour Alberta Health Link (toll free number: 1-866-408-5465), and they will be able to direct you to the appropriate health professional.

Potential Benefits: Your participation may lead to a better understanding of the positive body image experiences of women in general, and women who do pole fitness in particular. In addition, your participation may serve as a first step in the development of relevant individual and community-based positive body image programs.

Confidentiality and Storage of Data: The following steps will be taken to protect your identity and the privacy of the word for word interview text. Names or other identifying markers will not be discussed outside of your interviews. Pseudonyms (made up names) will be used instead of real names in all study reports, presentations, and/or newsletters.

Audiotapes will be kept and stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office for 5 years following the publication of the final reports, and then will be destroyed.

There are, however, limits on the level of confidentiality that researchers can ensure. Because you will take part in a focus group with other participants, you will be identifiable to other people in the group on the basis of what you have said. The researcher will be sure to safeguard the confidentiality of the group discussion, but cannot guarantee that other members of the group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not disclosing the contents of discussions outside the group, and be aware that others may not respect your confidentiality. After data collection is completed, the only identifying information (audio recordings, consent forms, transcripts, and photograph files) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years and then they will be destroyed. The transcripts will be shred and computer and digital voice files will be permanently deleted.

Right to Withdraw: Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study for any reason, without penalty of any sort, including current or future participation in this or any other program. Two weeks after the focus groups are completed, and once the researcher is writing results, please note that participation cannot be withdrawn.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point. Any questions you may have about this study may be directed to Ariel Dimler at dimler@ualberta.ca. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description provided above; I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's Name	Participant's Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Researcher's Name	Researcher's Signature	Date