

## PERCEPTIONS OF ELDERLY WOMEN ABOUT THEIR CORPOREALITY IN THE AGING PROCESS



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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to understand the perception of elderly women about bodily changes in the aging process. The design was qualitative, descriptive and cross-sectional. The study included 11 elderly women, aged between 60 and 69 years, with different levels of education, intentionally selected. The instrument used was a semi-structured interview script. For data analysis, the Bardin Content Analysis method was used. The evaluation of a good body perception throughout life was identified, but without ceasing to present the ambiguities found in the aging of women. A vigilance in maintaining a young and beautiful body coexists, in contrast to a maturity to accept the real body.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

From the growing aging population in Brazil, some demands gain prominence, in culture and academic studies, one of these points is the feminization of aging. That is, the fact that the number of women aged 60 years or older is greater than that of men, including with each decade of life, increasing the percentage difference in the number of women compared to the number of men who age in Brazil (Maximiano-Barreto et al., 2019).

When we talk specifically about the aging of women, there is no way to dissociate their constitution within a society and culture, where female and male roles impose rules, duties and demands according to gender throughout life. The representations of the body are constructed throughout life, just as aging is constructed, these processes occur marked by differences between genders (Moraes, 2011).

From this point on, beauty standards are constantly formed and modified. These stereotypes work as a form of oppression to the female body. Throughout their lives, women receive explicit expectations in relation to their bodies, which in addition to being beautiful must remain young (Novaes, 2011).

The increase in longevity and the fact that women are the expressive majority in the elderly population raises questions about female aging and the peculiarities it presents. The impact of body perception is something that accompanies many women, from birth, considering cultural crossings and pre-established beauty standards.

Based on the differences in the construction of body perception in the aging process of women, the objective of this study was to analyze the perception of elderly women, aged 60 to 69 years, about body changes in the aging process.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study has a qualitative, descriptive and cross-sectional methodological design. A qualitative research was chosen with the aim of listening more deeply to the elderly women themselves, respecting their subjectivity, in order to listen to the perspective of their personal experience. Augusto et al. (2013) describe that the possibility for the researcher to enter what is the natural environment of his research object, allows the understanding to take place from the meanings that the participants grant. Regarding the descriptive study, the authors state that it should keep the facts and phenomena found explicit as they were seen.

The study included 11 elderly women, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the region of Vale dos Sinos, Rio Grande do Sul. The participants were intentionally selected. The inclusion criteria were to be aged between 60 and 69 years, not to have a diagnosis of mental disorders and intellectual disabilities, and to consent to participate in the study by signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

The instrument used for this study was a semi-structured interview script. This script addressed questions related to how was their relationship with their body throughout life, the best periods and those that were challenging, how they perceive the aging of their bodies and how they feel about it, it was also questioned how they observed the aging of other generations (older and younger). Arcuri (2004) describes the importance of the interview, in order to enable the subjects themselves to interpret themselves "[...] giving voice to subjects gives them back autonomy, dignity, self-confidence, transforms them into masters of their desires, integrates their thinking with their action" (p. 98).

Data collection took place in the second half of 2023, after the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, having received opinion No. 6,167,791.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Content analysis was used for data analysis, according to the method developed by Laurence Bardin. According to Câmara (2013), this technique is suggested for application in various forms of communication. From it, the researcher will investigate characteristics that are beyond the subject's verbal manifestations. The researcher will first focus his attention on understanding the meaning of what was communicated and later will seek other possible meanings within the discourse. Bardin (2011) considers that content analysis, in the context of interviews, presents the need for the researcher to use delicacy when doing so. The author considers that the verbal material requires resourcefulness and the collected material contains richness and complexity, as it is a subjective discourse of the interviewee. Where there is "free staging of what this person lived, felt and thought about something" (2011, p. 93), including then his singularity, even with regard to the emergence of his unconscious.

Figure 1 shows the description of the study participants, showing that the mean age was 63.09 years, half with the presence of a partner and the other half single, widowed and divorced. Regarding the level of education, it was decided to present a diversity of situations, as the importance of this variability was considered for the analysis of the results.

All participants were white. The participants had their identities protected and so a flower name was adopted to be able to identify in the study.

Figure 1. Characterization of the participants

Aliases	Age	Marital status	Schooling	Race
Jasmine	62	Widow	Incomplete elementary school	White
Dahlia	60	Stable union	Incomplete high school	White
Astromelia	64	Married woman	Incomplete high school	White
Daisy	62	Single	Incomplete high school	White
Tulip	67	Widow	Complete high school	White
Gerbera	68	Divorcee	Technologist	White
Camellia	60	Divorcee	Superior	White
Rose	60	Married woman	Superior	White
Magnolia	64	Married woman	Masters	White
Orchid	65	Married woman	Masters	White
Violet	62	Widow	Masters	White

Source: Survey data

Considering the aforementioned aspects and the phases of content analysis, three categories were defined and will be presented below: The body in the aging process of women, The relationship between weight and body perception and generational and cultural differences in women's body perception.

## THE BODY IN THE AGING PROCESS OF WOMEN

During the aging process, the body goes through several changes, this includes body dimensions such as weight, height, and composition. These changes are usually identified from the age of 45 in relation to weight, for example, which tends to increase, stabilizing when reaching the age of 70 and may decrease from the age of 80. These situations have multifactorial justifications, which include hormonal changes, and even habits practiced throughout life. These physical changes, although predicted, are factors directly related to the quality of life of the elderly person (Lima, 2007).

The marker of age in the aging process, for some elderly people, may represent concerns, in the face of the juvenile pattern disseminated by the media, which allows the sociocultural classification of who is old and who is young. The concept of age is something created with the intention of standardizing social aspects, facilitating social and cultural

dynamics. But it is also an experience lived in different ways, where having a chronological age does not make all people of this age equal (Lima; Rivemales, 2013).

The group of women studied presented a specific age group of 60 to 69 years, considered young elderly. The mean age group was 63.09 years, being a sample that in developed countries could not be considered as elderly. Among the 11 women who participated in the study, two are retired and maintain household activities, two are also retired, but maintain a routine of volunteer work and the other seven still have regular work. They are mostly active women, which contributes both in the individual sense and in the social sense of participation that tends to be linked to the labor market. Thus, this perception of not belonging to the group of elderly women is understandable, as their lives do not fit into the social stereotypes in relation to the elderly population, which is usually linked to characteristics such as passivity, for example.

According to Debert (1994), aging is a process that generates identity crisis and is directly related to the fact of reconstructing it. With contemporaneity and the rights acquired by women in society, female aging has also been redefined, offering possibilities for new lifestyles, with more freedom and autonomy, "a passage from a totally regulated world to another in which they feel impelled to create their own rules" (p. 48). In this sense, we have the statements of Rosa and Dália:

I still don't feel old – despite being old, now I'm 60 and they gave me an elderly card – can you believe that I had to park here and I couldn't put it in the elderly person's space? (laughs) there was a vacancy there and then I thought I don't feel like an old woman, I'm going to leave it to someone older than me, then I crossed it and put it on the other side, I thought I'm not going to take the place of someone who needs it, right (Rosa, 60 years old).

And so funny that I don't think "my god I'm 60 years old!" I don't believe it, you know, because I'm the age, but it's only in the chronological age because I don't feel that age, you know? And that's good, that's very good (Dália, 60 years old).

According to Lima (2007), many of the prejudices identified in relation to the elderly are related to their bodies, within the capital identification that they are no longer agile and profitable. "Discrimination against the elderly is the result of the typical values of a consumer society and the commodification of social relations" (p.35). Lima and Bueno complement this discourse by stating that:

[...] new ways of valuing the process of old age and aging must be found and promoted that are not a 'mockery' of the values that are desired for youth, in a constant attempt to juvenilize the elderly, denying the right of people to be as they are, without having to assume an identity that is not theirs, denying themselves only to be socially accepted. A source of alienation, suffering and even illnesses, which finds in women the most fertile target, due to the insistent social demands for eternal youth, beauty and a sexual and desirable body (Lima; Bueno, 2009, p. 277).

Lima (2007) points out that the body of the person in the aging process should not be considered synonymous with a passive or inactive body. In society, bodies are seen from their functionality and durability, demonstrating their 'competence' by remaining immune to aging, seen as a commodity. The capitalist view of the function of these bodies points out that: "What is ugly, finite, perishes and dies... does not consume and, indisputably, a market or exchange value has not yet been found for this phenomenon" (Vilhena et al., 2005, p. 113). Fin et al. (2017) add that:

The aesthetic experience of looking at oneself reveals a duality between appreciated and depreciated images, externalized by the different ways of understanding and feeling the reality of old age. By unveiling the appearance of the aging body, women confess their feelings in the face of the aspects of the years lived in an intertwining of beauty and ugliness (2017, p.86).

Maintaining the sequence of what was the normal pattern throughout life and the ability to perform daily activities configure the functional capacity of the elderly person. In this regard, functionality is related to the subject's own maintenance of autonomy, who has the necessary skills to maintain an independent life. The women in this sample, because they are young elderly, who mostly maintain their activities, do not perceive themselves as totally elderly people also because of a social understanding of what it means to be elderly, linking them to a time of passivity that does not describe them. (Novelli; Silva, 2018)

### **Relationship with social environments**

In different narratives, the issue of the social environment in which they are or were inserted was highlighted by the study participants. The social environment could be an aspect of demands on how they should or should not present themselves or even be considered by them a protective factor when other people in their circle took the existing

aesthetic pressures in a balanced way. Camellia, Astromelia and Gerbera demonstrate at different stages of life that social environments can help or hinder the development/aging process.

Before we always worried, I always had my hair dyed, while I worked until my retirement, even for the sake of appearance. I have gray hair I think since I was 35, very young, then my appearance I think this issue of having presentable hair (Camellia, 60 years old).

Yes, with the comments, right, because I studied at a nun's school, a well-regarded school (...) so there everyone had to be standard, had to be tidy, I was different (Astromélia, 64 years old).

I don't pay much attention to these wrinkles that are showing up there, so the heads are very good, in a little while I only got involved with good head people... I think that helps, right!? Because if you have an unhealthy environment, of paranoid people, like I have already lived in the company, wow... (Gerbera, 68 years old).

Women need discipline and dedication to maintain control over their bodies. The speeches chant a "morality" in keeping her beauty within the expected. So, even though she didn't like or want to dye her hair, Camélia describes having interpreted that this was the right choice to make, as an unspoken requirement of her work environment. "Superwoman, without realizing all the implications, had to add to her *professional* commitments serious work in the field of 'beauty'. This new responsibility became increasingly rigorous" (Wolf, 2020, p. 48).

One of the social changes found in women's lives was their working conditions, from which it is observed that this is also an environment that favors comparisons and competitions between their own gender. According to Goldenberg (2011), in Brazil, there is an ambiguity between the development of individualism and the greater intensity of social pressures.

Morality is directly related to the body in form, so bodies that do not have this standardized presentation become immoral in the contemporary. "The body on its entire surface must be shown, exhibited, so that it can be appreciated in the same measure, desired, envied or just and just be noticed, as long as it is adequate for this" (Albino; Vaz, 2008, p. 205).



According to Bitencourt (2015), it is observed that investments are necessary for the care of this female body, which are financial and emotional. These are essential to be in accordance with the normative standards of the body that presents itself to the social. Santaella (2004) corroborates when he states that: "The body is everywhere. Commented, transfigured, researched, dissected in philosophy, feminist thought, cultural studies, natural and social sciences, arts and literature" (p.133).

This new morality, where the criterion is good shape, only extremely well-cared bodies without marks of time or excesses – such as wrinkles, stretch marks, cellulite, fat, flaccidity, white hair – are the bodies that, whether or not they are dressed, are considered decent. On the other hand, those who possess these marks or excesses represent a moral defect, since they have not worked or dedicated themselves sufficiently to this body (Goldenberg, 2011).

### **The age of 50 and menopause**

Bodies have different attributes when considered from a gender perspective. The culture assigns masculinity and femininity in separate fields. When women are observed within biological specificities, they are understood as the body that generates. This body is crossed by motherhood as an identity of the female gender. Currently, with greater female autonomy, the issue of motherhood can be a choice, although culturally it may not be understood in this way. But, even though this choice is individual, the aspect of the age to generate, which is biological, conveys the idea that women's bodies have an "expiration date" and this issue is still an attribute that reverberates on how female bodies are seen (Bitencourt, 2015, p. 446).

Between the ages of 40 and 50, women go through significant changes that are present in their bodies and in how these are identified and interpreted in the social, the woman goes from her fertile period for reproduction to a non-reproductive body, in a generalized way. Physiological changes, such as the decrease in estrogen, are often accompanied by physical and emotional symptoms, there are hot flashes, a greater probability of mood instability, changes in your aesthetics that can influence your self-esteem as a whole (Xavier; Pinto, 2019). Dália, Rosa and Jasmin refer to the entry into menopause and the effects:

There at the beginning of menopause we realize it like this, because menopause is a process that I have talked to women who have gone through it so well and didn't even notice anything, not for me. It was confusing like that, a lot of new things, a lot of change, in fact it's a very sudden change in the body, so I felt, I felt those hot flashes a lot, I felt, I had moments of depression, of anguish (Dália, 60 years old). Around 50 the transformation begins that I noticed, external, that then I realized that the skin changes, the hair, I menstruated until I was 52, there at 52 was the last period, from there that... It went downhill! (Rosa, 60 years old).

What I liked the least was when I entered menopause, that's how it bothered me a lot! Weakened the nail... I went in there, I think I had more or less what? I think 55 over there, I was stressed, but I don't know how you know how she made one... it gave a change like this in my body (Jasmine, 62 years old)

Santos et al. (2016), when studying women's perceptions of body and emotional changes in the climacteric period, identified that physical and aesthetic changes are significant for them, but that in their reports they attribute greater significance to the emotional changes faced. This aspect was also possible to understand from the reports of the women interviewed in this research, where emotions, feeling stressed, with a more depressive mood was described as the greatest challenge of this period almost unanimously. Orquídea describes the emotional changes and the influence of body image:

Menopause is a very bad period for women, okay, why is it bad? It saddens you, because there is the chemical issue, the hormones all go down there, they abandon you, you gain weight, it saddens and weakens you, so menopause is horrible for women! (...) Menopause was an emotional impact and in my mood, I got a depressed mood, shrunken I didn't want to leave the house, I went out and came back, but it was different... a period there I think lasted about eight years, even eight years, I was between improvements and worsenings, if I lost weight I got better, my mood was according to my weight too (Orquídea, 65 years old).

Mota et al. (2021) developed a study in southeastern Bahia with climacteric women and the results also showed mood instability (69% of the sample) and sleep disorders (61.9%) as the most addressed complaints with a negative impact on the quality of life of the interviewees. The authors also point out the social changes that have occurred, identifying in that group access to education, financial independence, and body care, unlike previous generations of women, something that is in line with the women studied in this

research. However, they point out that despite these changes, there is still an invisibility in relation to the climacteric, which leads to not thinking about health strategies that provide greater well-being for women who experience this phase. "Thus, the global understanding of this period is essential for better health care, as it is necessary not to be restricted only to the sphere of sexuality and beauty" (Mota et al., 2021, p.7).

In our study, another aspect that was highly pointed out during menopause was the weight gain that some of them had during this period, causing them to worry about maintaining a weight, having a vigilance with the scale that did not describe them throughout their lives. "If the social context values a thin body model, corresponding to the standard of beauty, overweight and obesity cause embarrassment" (Fin et al., 2017, 81). In this sense, we highlight Magnolia's speech about weight gain and the way she deals with these changes in body perception:

I think that from the age of 55/56, about ten years ago, that my belly increased, the breasts grew, I have to take care of my diet, something I never worried about before, I know it's age, it's part of it... It's the aging of the body, it gets older, I don't worry about having a younger woman's body or a younger body than I have because I know that won't happen and it's against human nature (laughs) 64 is 64, right, but that excess fat bothers me, cellulite in the belly that I didn't have and now I have (Magnolia, 64 years old)

Ferreira et al. (2013) refer to a point that is also related to the discourses of the women interviewed: "a physiological attribute, menopause, appears as a mark of aging" (p. 418). In their narratives, they describe that during this period they began to observe the body more. When they look in the mirror, they perceive the passage of the years, as if they were not there before this period, which leads to reflection and pause. Even though these changes are natural, physiological, it is as if what was very far away becomes real, which is why it is such an important marker for women, because it requires an elaboration that goes through the emotional of each one.

### **Mismatch with the reflection in the mirror**

In culture, the image of women is intertwined with beauty. This discourse is repeated and emphasized constantly, bringing beauty as a feminine duty. In this way, those who do not have beauty cannot be considered fully women. Also as a result of these social

representations, numerous concerns arise in women in relation to their own body, so that it can be identified with their gender through the required beauty (Vilhena et al., 2005).

Lima (2008) describes that the changes that occur in the body result from the way subjects place themselves in sociocultural spaces. The understanding and perception of the aging of the body, which is an irreversible path, puts women in conflict. In general, the mirror issue is one of the most predominant. The social request and permanence of youth are perceived as ways of maintaining beauty. The social imperative is that the woman must be beautiful and young, and the body in this environment is constantly being judged and controlled, adding prejudices to the body of the elderly woman. The conflict referred to is demonstrated by Rosa and Astromélia:

Emotionally I feel young then, with energy like I'm 30, but when I look in the mirror and when I look at myself..., but I'm not that person anymore, you know? And then you stay, it gives you like a little depression like this, you know, you feel sadder. Mismatch of my energy as a person, as well as my body, it seems that it doesn't match anymore, because I think one thing, but the body is no longer the same, so there is a conflict (Rosa, 60 years old)

Oh wow, everything is different, it creates more cellulite, it creates more wrinkles, if you look in the mirror you think you will see that person and you are seeing another. I have the idea that I have that young face, but when I get to the mirror it's old, the conversation is the same, you're still the same, but your appearance is different. That's the difference, certain things can't be worn, certain clothes don't fit well, so be careful with everything. (Astromelia, 64 years old)

Faced with the demands in relation to youth, women adapt to be accepted and realize the importance of being within the standards for this to happen. They deny their subjectivity and identity, to mold themselves to what society demands of them, that is, beauty and youth. They are concerned with the image that people have about their body, "starting to demand more of themselves, because they cannot imagine themselves outside these pre-established standards" (Malheiros Junior; Freitas, 2012, p. 284).

As society manifests what is expected of the body; beauty, power, strength, functionality, youthfulness, it also creates the expectation of presenting itself according to this description and this is what is expected of the reflection in the mirror. With this, the truth of the body and the changes in appearance arise, which also recall the functional changes,

awakening the aging person from a representation of his body that is now illusory because it is no longer what is reflected (Ferreira et al., 2013).

Jorge (2005), in a research with elderly women, reports the description of their concerns related to anguish and suffering in dealing with the changes that come with age. According to the author, "such feelings arise from the image that the mirror reveals to them" (p. 57), associating the role of bodily changes to this. She also adds that the relationship with others and the role of women in society is directly linked to the body and beauty. Women, who culturally have always been associated with beauty and admiration, begin to feel a devaluation as they age, of no longer being "looked at and admired" by their absence of youth.

The body goes through several processes, modifying itself according to the demands of the consumer market. The person when consuming also becomes the consumption itself when seeking the image of beauty that is sold, within the models exposed in society. In this way, the devaluation of aging is reproduced, with the consequence that this population often becomes invisible. There is no interest in exposing in the social something that is denied, the finitude of being, which this body exposes by presenting physical declines. Vigor and youth are important elements within a society in which the body, in addition to being a means of expression, is also a builder of identities. The body is subjected to a control in which it must be beautiful, young and vigorous, even though longevity is something imminent that needs greater prominence and visibility (Lima; Rivemales, 2013).

### **Improvement of the relationship at maturity**

During aging, there are changes that occur naturally. The routine, social and work dynamics change and in line with this period there are also changes in priorities in the lives of those who age. At this point, changes also occur in the way they see and interpret their bodies. Cultural, social and financial aspects contribute to a look of body dissatisfaction, but for older women, their development of maturity over the years lived can contribute positively when defining their priorities, being more linked to concerns with health and well-being aspects than necessarily in aesthetics (Fin et al., 2017). Camélia and Tulipa demonstrate in their speeches this transition to maturity:

I think adulthood is better than in my adolescence, in adolescence we find fault in everything, dammit! (...) We accept ourselves much better when we are a certain age, for what? I don't need to please others, I need to please myself, I think it's really

maturity, so that I'll want to please others, I have to be good with myself (Camellia, 60 years old).

I think that we, for example, are realistic above all else, we have to be realistic and know that at my age I can no longer have a body of 15 or 17 or 20, everything changes, everything transforms (Tulipa, 67 years old).

Fin et al. (2017) developed a study on the perception of elderly women about body beauty and its meaning in aging, where the sample was divided into two groups according to their socioeconomic level. It was observed that in a dynamic with the mirror, the group that had a higher income, predominantly, captured appreciation of their image, demonstrating well-being and satisfaction with their bodies. On the other hand, the low-income group, for the most part, brought depreciation and melancholy when observing their reflection in the mirror. This can be justified from many perspectives, both in the economic sense linked to financial power, and in the way they look at themselves when there are more emerging demands throughout life.

In another study carried out by Bonfim et al. (2019), which sought to identify the perceptions of elderly women about their self-image in aging, the issue of freedom that being in this age group can present was found. Freedom of time, choices, family and work pressures, thus revealing something positive in relation to what they experienced in their youth, something that is directly related to the way their daily life occurs, and can be lighter and with quality of life. In a way, this aspect is also related to how much aesthetic pressures can, for some women, have less impact on aging, since they consider different interests and priorities than pleasing other people or environments.

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WEIGHT AND BODY PERCEPTION

The participants in this study, even with different levels of education, most of them reported throughout their lives that they had not perceived difficulty in accepting or even making external judgments in relation to their bodies. Among them, many quickly associated this good relationship with the fact that they were thin women and that this circumstance even brought them praise throughout their lives, favoring the way they interpreted themselves. Participants Rosa and Magnólia refer to this relationship between body perception and the situation of being thin.

So... I always have been - thank God! I'm thin, like that by nature... (Rosa, 60 years old).

I never had much problem with my body and I never worried much about my body, because I never had a problem like that of obesity, of gaining a lot of weight.... So if I notice that I've increased the weight a little, I reduce the carbohydrate a little, I weigh myself every week, at most every 15 (days) (Magnolia, 64 years old).

Cruz et al. (2021), in a study in the area of nutrition, report that, especially after media evolution, body image and its recognition in the social environment are associated with an "interpretation of happiness, confidence, and self-esteem" (p. 96) when their bodies are accepted and praised. So the association that the participants make of the good relationship with their bodies to the fact of being thin or within standards does not occur from an isolated interpretation, but from a social environment that interprets it within its image.

Beauty standards and their social interpretations refer to a cultural time where they are constructed. The emergence of the exaltation of a thin body for women is linked to a time after the installation of feminist movements, in the 1960s. In this period, some women acquire perceptions beyond the male gaze about themselves. Almost as a consequence of this period, market incentives for this regulation of a thin body, of light products, of body surveillance for women began (Hessel; Furtado, 2019).

In this context, self-control over one's own body becomes clear and so does the disciplining and standardization of female bodies. Distancing oneself from the ideal of thin beauty receives the social and medical interpretation of being sick if one becomes fat, or out of the consumer market, which can make the woman feel insecure about her body image (Hessel; Furtado, 2019, p. 83).

These sociocultural expectations of the thinness of female bodies make naturally thin women feel privileged compared to those who are not, as we identified in the participants of our study. Even though their body weight was not questioned, for them to be thin it is understood as a facilitator in the relationship with their bodies.

In social discourse, the thin body is naturalized, as if this were expected for everyone, and this conception is disseminated both in common sense and in medical discourses. The media discourse sometimes moves away from questions related to the

healthy body and approaches the capitalist market, including a sense of the need for medicalization, for procedures on fat people, especially in the situation of women (Hessel; Furtado, 2019).

When talking about women, it is necessary to consider that the standard of beauty praises not only thinness, but also youthfulness. A standard that naturally cannot be achieved, since the body is aging with the passing of the years. Even though beauty standards are in constant movement, as well as culture, customs, political and social movements, the demand to be beautiful persists. Beauty standards may vary in each generation, but the way control over bodies remains (Fin et al., 2017).

Considering the population of women who are in old age, it is important to note that even those who have the expected weight and have habits considered essential for maintaining a healthy life, such as good nutrition and physical exercise, are still dissatisfied with their bodies. This point is related to the way that sociocultural pressures in relation to aesthetics are constituted, that is, where society and the media shape a standard of beauty that is beyond a weight – even if it is a highly valued aspect. The focus can then be identified in a specific aesthetic set, with hair, a way of dressing, youth, among other aspects that become unattainable (Caluête et al., 2015).

Lima and Bueno (2009) point out that with the installation of feminism, social changes are presented that need to be considered. The authors describe how essential gender equality is, distinguishing that it is not about the differences found between men and women, but about the repercussion of the injustice that some of them present in society. Women need to face greater vulnerability during aging, associating the appreciation of youth from the social perspective, which occurs especially with women.

Wolf (2020), when referring to the myth of beauty and its emergence, points out that "... with each generation in which there was a strong advance on the part of women, some ideal arose to suck the energies and thus ensure that they did not progress too much" (p. 10). This finding is associated with aesthetic concerns and the search for a body referred to as ideal and consequently unattainable. Periodically changes occur so that these patterns are modified and women start to dedicate themselves to the pursuit of this ideal, making political and social spaces escape from their priorities.

Heine and Marinho (2014) refer to the changes that occurred when analyzing media campaigns in the 40s and 90s. In the first, the products offered aimed at weight gain and in the second, weight loss. The enormous change in discourse interferes with the



interpretation of the ideal body disseminated and understood by the female population, as the holder of beauty and happiness.

It is identified how much for the participants of our study being thin was associated with something positive and a standard to be achieved, even though in the previous generation theirs female beauty and health was associated with overweight, with a fat body. In the discourses, even though they have this thin body, it is also possible to identify the vigilance so that it remains so, emphasizing the fact that even with a good body relationship these women are not immune to aesthetic pressures, in a maintenance that disregards hormonal and metabolic issues of aging, as we can evaluate by the statement of Violeta (62 years old) "I never had a problem with my body, As I tell you again, I have always been within the standards. I was never outside the standards, a standard stipulated by society, let's say so, so I was always within the standards".

A study that sought to identify the influence of eating behavior and body image on self-esteem was able to describe how much women, even if they are within their ideal weight, according to the Body Mass Index (BMI), tend to have a more affected aesthetic view when they identify themselves as being larger than in reality. Unlike men who do not tend to distort their images, even if they are overweight or obese (Cruz et al., 2021).

This constant body and aesthetic surveillance of women has a greater tendency to be conflicting, distancing the real body from the expected or desired body. This situation leads to points that require attention, but that do not belong to the scope of this study, such as the search for quick solutions related to restrictive diets, aesthetic methods and procedures that are often not congruent with a body with physical and mental health. These procedures are closely related to image distortion and the high rate of eating disorders in the female public.

## GENERATIONAL AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN BODY PERCEPTION

### **Ageing of the previous generation**

Considering social changes and advances in the issue of women's rights, it is currently possible to experience new configurations about aging. For a long time, female aging was related only to its function in being the grandmother, as Lima (2008) points out: "(...) there is a social stigma that still persists in the image of the old woman as a grandmother" (p. 95). The aging of women, usually widows, was once mostly dependent on their children, thus being linked to the exclusive role of being a grandmother. Margarida and

Dália reflect on what the aging of the previous generation was like, marked by many difficulties.

In the old days when a woman was 40 years old she was old and old in every way, she was old to marry, she was old to live, she was old for everything, I think this is very sad, you know, this generation that has passed, poor things, right, because they lived less. Today we live, right, today with 70 years old you are still active if you have health, my god, they are not... it was very annoying this part, but it was prejudice, ignorance too, but it was very sad, it was a very Jewish life (Margarida, 62 years old).

Not long ago, a 60-year-old person, wow, was already there with a good time, many times. Back when we were children, my aunts of 45-50 were little ladies, so we realize this, nowadays no, women are more active, at 60 years old many are starting over (Dália, 60 years old)

Currently, there are other possibilities, as the women interviewed in this research present, being active, mostly working and dedicating themselves to their desires beyond the family roles they play. "Today, aging has been, for some women, a time of realization of dreams and postponed desires" (Lima; Bueno, 2009, p. 276).

The bodies of the elderly women in this sample were constituted in a society that began to age, one of the points mentioned when looking at the previous generation is precisely the weight, which was mostly desired by mothers, grandmothers and aunts. They understood that having fat demonstrated health within the understanding of that generation. "The robust bodies and voluminous forms, which were contemplated and portrayed by great artists in the past, are now admired for the value of the work of art, but not as a reference of bodily beauty for contemporary women" (Fin et al., 2017, p. 78). However, Camélia, Rosa, Jasmin, Violeta and Magnólia understand that the body perception of more voluminous forms was due to the lack of opportunities for care and society's concern with elderly women.

My mother is complicated! If I analyze my mother's generation, my mother's generation was a generation that doesn't respect the body (...) her generation is aging without health, aging with pain medication, with anxiety medication, with Rivotril sleeping pills the vast majority have, the vast majority take Omeprazole to

endure the medications they take, So it's complicated! This is the aging that we learned to look at "I don't want this!". (Camellia, 60 years old).

The older women in the case didn't have that concern, there were no procedures, there weren't, I don't see it like that... I see my mother going on a lot of diet too, that's right, concern about her body she had to be chubby, she knows how to lose weight. But aesthetic procedures of putting on breasts, of doing plastic surgery, that didn't exist at the time.... (Rosa, 60 years old).

Look at my mother... I've never seen her complain about her body and she's stronger than me, but I've never seen her complain much about her body or that I know of aunts too, they were very calm about it (Jasmine, 62 years old).

The women of another generation, really, when I stop and think, I say, my god, how they looked older, they didn't have lifelong care, because this is not a care that I did now, it's the result of lifelong care (Violeta, 62 years old).

Drastic change, change from generation to generation is a drastic change, my mother is from the generation of women – both my mother and my mother-in-law – who did not care about their bodies, did not take care of them (Magnolia, 64 years old).

My family, the aunts, were very poor people, they didn't think about it, the concerns of this generation were different. It was to know if the cake was ready, if... He didn't have our life, no... (Gerbera, 68 years old).

Debert (1994) described that the female population often carries a negative interpretation of what the aging of their mothers and grandmothers was like – dependence on children, isolation, black clothes – with this, they seek ways to experience their own aging in a distinct and active way. When comparing with the findings of this research, about three decades later, we observe that elderly women continue to seek to experience aging differently from their mothers, but today their interpretations of health, quality of life and forms of work are the most cited points in search of differentiation from the previous generation.

Del Priore (2000) already pointed out, at the turn of this century, that the current generation experienced different concerns from their grandmothers. This generation has become much less religious, but much more concerned with keeping the body immune to

social rejection. "Our torment is not the fire of hell, but the scales and the mirror" (p. 11). The author also describes that even though women currently have greater power over their bodies, with the advent of contraceptive methods, much is still repeated in traditional models. Even if in different ways, female submission has not ceased to exist, today it is no longer associated with pregnancies, but with the search for the perfect and idealized body.

In relation to the bodies of women from previous generations, the participants in this research demonstrate that they are bothered by the issue of the body being fatter. Heine and Marinho (2014) point out how much the body is directly related to its discursive construction, which occurs along with sociocultural aspects.

The beauty standards of the reported time were that of a "fuller" woman, not very thin, whose physical complexion indicated health and, consequently, the physical capacity to bear children. At the time, the discourse on health was also different: fat, instead of indicating something negative, was seen as a symbol of a healthy body, while being thin was a sign of poor health, weakness, and disease (Heine; Marinho, 2014, p. 98).

### **The younger generation and the body**

From one perspective, the emancipation of the woman's body is observed, focusing on various aspects such as sexual, reproduction and clothing. On the other hand, currently, women experience greater aesthetic oppression, which is capable of generating more anxieties than in the past. "One of the moments of greatest independence and female freedom is also the one in which a high degree of control over the body is imposed on Brazilian women" (Goldenberg, 2011, p. 550).

There is a kind of requirement to practice a thorough dedication to the body, since this body needs to be exposed, to be on display and constant and increasingly detailed evaluation of how each part of the body needs to be. "In the midst of the paradoxes that make up the discourse, the maxim prevails that everyone can be beautiful, as long as they invest in themselves, use beauty products, take care of their health, deserve to be beautiful" (Albino; Vaz, 2008, p. 210).

[...] It is important to highlight the impositions of the industry's beauty standards, since women have increasingly seen the obligation to undergo aesthetic procedures in order to fit into society, since when they feel unhappy and inferior to others, it is not possible to be recognized and valued. (Cruz et al., 2021, p. 103).

Below we present the concerns of the participants with the new generation. Rosa demonstrates discomfort with her daughter's generation, which maintains a superficial relationship with her body. Violeta also presents this concern, reinforcing the idea that women seek to please others. Astromélia and Orquídea point out the exaggerations in the search for aesthetics.

This generation of my daughter so now, my god in heaven, this is life! It seems that there is a superficial life, a parallel life, an artificial life, a life... You know, that she is always worried about such superficial things, focused more on this aesthetic and physical part, I go crazy, with the other good things in life. I think do they think? What will be from now on, I am very worried because it is too much, I see my daughter already like this (Rosa, 60 years old).

I think they are more concerned with the body for exposure, to please others! (Violeta, 62 years old).

And the young people are also appealing more and are also demanding more and are not loving themselves, so much so that most take medicine, because of these demands... The little friend did it, the little friend has a better body, that whole thing and has the fastest resource, it's very immediate "Oh how beautiful your nose, I want one like it!" In the past it was clothing "oh how beautiful your eye, where did you make that eye?" (laughs) "That hair of yours, where did you get those lights? Oh here we go!" The beautiful thing is that big mouth, that body, that turbocharged traseirão that they put on, in the past it was the big breast, this fashion is over a little bit, now it's the face! (Astromelia, 64 years old).

What I see today is an exaggeration in correction, okay? Facial correction, lip correction, people all have the same pattern of features, big mouth puts a lot of things here everything is huge and everyone has nose surgery, right?! "then I want to do it, I'm going to do it" everyone is pumped, I think so, I see that there is an exaggeration, I observe this exaggeration (Orquídea, 65 years old).

It can be seen in the participants' statements that the previous generation took medicine for the pain caused by wear and tear and carelessness with the body and the new generation takes medicine because of the demands to achieve an ideal body. Currently we cannot exempt the role of the media in relation to definitions and propagation of the standard body, the one that should be accepted, desired and objective for both women and

men. When we talk about women in the timeline, it is observed that for a period of time, overweight was desirable and more recently, thinness has become the standard. Today there are still workout and gym bodies, but they are still not universally accepted, as when we talk about thinness. But whatever the standard of beauty, its diffusion takes on greater proportions, especially when we talk about the younger population, through media discourses, which disregards the biotype of most women, presenting some body models that will be the ideal bodies (Polli et al., 2021).

Secchi et al. (2009) conducted a survey with university students on the perception of body image and social representations of the body, he presented how far the idealized standard is from an "ideal" body. This is because the body image desired by the women participating in the research is the representation of a body recognized by the WHO as underweight. It was observed that the woman's body - young in this cut - is accompanied by the demands of being beautiful, being thin, generating power and social status and also being healthy. This last criterion is further distorted by the contribution of the previous requirements, often leading to eating disorders.

## **CONCLUSION**

Among the narratives of the participants in this study, the ambiguities present in the aging of women stand out. They narrated their good relationships with their bodies both in the past and in the present, but without neglecting to mention the things they are bothered by, such as weight surveillance, fear of obesity and the procedures performed. They demonstrated the aesthetic pressure that interferes with their interpretations of themselves. On the other hand, they also point out a certain lightness by not caring as before about some changes, attributing to maturity, this way of dealing with the body.

Menopause emerged with great intensity in the discourses and even the minority of them who said they had not been impacted by this period commented on the difficulties experienced by friends and family. For many of them, physiological changes were important, such as weight gain after a life within the "standard" of thinness, but emotional and psychological aspects were classified as more challenging. We must understand that the participants in this study have already adapted to menopause, but are still organizing themselves in this new image of being elderly women. Consequently, they are elaborating the losses and gains of this new evolutionary period, but the impacts resulting from

menopause are still present in their body relationship and are predominant when talking about body and aging.

The changes perceived between generations was also a very relevant aspect. A very comprehensive subject that requires further discussion, but which among the narratives corroborate the discussions of political movements such as feminism and the changes that have occurred since then. From the perceptions of a past in which women were not concerned with their bodies and their health to a view that the younger generation may be in a more distorted relationship, interpreted by many of them as exaggerated in the search to shape their bodies from the desire for exposure and the search for perfection. In this sense, it also contributes to thinking that this more critical view of the younger generation will also impact the way in which aging processes will be configured in the coming decades.

In this study, it was possible to give voice to 11 women about their relationships and perceptions about their bodies, with different experiences and understandings, but who met in some aspects, especially at the beginning of their narratives when asked about their relationship with the body throughout life. The associations of a generally positive view of their bodies were predominant, as well as the discourse related to justifying it because they were thin women.

In the design of this study, the participants were chosen so that there were differences in relation to the level of education, but the sample was homogeneous. Therefore, although there was a concern to be able to listen to women of different levels of education, this point proved to be less relevant - within this context - than an evaluation based on socioeconomic levels would have been. Participants with lower levels of education, for example, reported having a purchasing power that allowed them to undergo procedures and pay for health professionals throughout their lives. Points that contributed to an improvement in their relationships with their bodies, something that we understand is not the reality of a large part of the Brazilian population.

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