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Midlife Women on Holiday: Does Physical Appearance Matter?

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Title: Midlife Women on Holiday: Does Physical Appearance Matter?

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Abstract:

It is well recognised that body image, and especially the current fixation on ‘the thin ideal’, can have a powerful effect on women’s lives, leading to normative body dissatisfaction, which can include declining self-esteem, negative mood, mood disturbances, and unhealthy weight loss practices. One might ask whether the holiday environment is one in which women can escape the relentless societal prescriptions of how a woman should look. This paper extends an earlier study of young women (aged in their 20s) (Small, 2016) by examining how mid-life women (30s–50s) experience their physical appearance when on holiday. It looks at women’s thoughts and feelings about their appearance and the salience of appearance to the success of a holiday or specific types of holiday, questioning whether the holiday is a site for the reinforcement or resistance of women’s feminised (through physical appearance) identities. Four groups of women participated in the study, which employed the social constructionist, feminist research method, memory-work. Through written and discussed memories, the women explored the social, shared meaning of their embodied holiday experiences in relation to how they looked. The study explored memories of both positive and negative experiences.

As was found with younger women, most positive memories reflected approximation to the body ideal (slim, toned, tanned, and appropriately dressed), while negative memories were the inverse. However, the nature of the travel group and the type of holiday space could affect whether appearance was experienced positively or negatively. As with younger women, the beach generated the greatest experience of self-surveillance and discomfort. While there were a number of women who claimed that they were more relaxed about their physical appearance than they had been at younger ages, there was still the ongoing experience of judgement and adherence to societal prescriptions for most. Unlike the younger women, by the 30s and 40s, a number of women had experienced changes to their bodies brought about by childbirth leading many women to lament their earlier holidays (with younger bodies).

The holiday is an embodied experience, not just in terms of what the body can do, but also in terms of how we think and feel about the look of our bodies. While the holiday is constructed as a space of escape, freedom, recreation, and wellbeing, concerns for their physical appearance can prevent many women from fully achieving these goals.

References:

Small, J. (2016). Holiday bodies: Young women and their appearance. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 58, 18–32.