

“You have to let go.” The experience of aging among non-heterosexual women aged 50 and over

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Summary

Aim. The aim of the study is to present the body image of women aged 50+ living in Poland with a declared non-heterosexual orientation in the context of aging, menopause, sexual and gender identity.

Material and methods. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with non-heterosexual cis-women aged 50–67, focused around three main areas: menopause, body image and aging.

Results. Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of two main thematic areas: (1) menopause as re-integration with the body, (2) breaking away from heteronormative femininity. Additionally, in the second theme, a subcategory was identified: negotiating gender identity – nonbinary lesbianism.

Conclusions. The analysis of narratives indicates a preservation of a positive body image amidst a great diversity in experiencing aging and menopause among non-heterosexual women in Poland. At the same time, the obtained results allow for the identification of patterns indicating that older non-heterosexual women may negotiate their sexual and gender identity throughout their lives. As a result, it is easier for them not to succumb to stereotypically directed social expectations regarding appearance and sexual expression aimed at women.

Key words: sexual and gender minorities, aging, menopause

Introduction

The topic of aging among people representing gender, sexual and relational diversity (GSRD) has become of interest in recent years not only to gerontologists [1, 2], but also to social science researchers [3]. However, this interest extends less so to non-heterosexual women of middle and older age, who still constitute an under-represented group in social studies of the LGBTQ+ community [4], especially in the context of Polish studies.

In research on the experiences of non-heterosexual women related to the aging process, two trends can be distinguished. On the one hand, there is an optimistic perspective associated with the multidimensional theory of *successful aging* [5, 6], and on the other, a realistic perspective that focuses on the discrimination and exclusion experienced by older non-heterosexual women [7–9], disparities in physical and mental health [10, 11], and limited access to social services [12]. The former suggests that a hostile environment forces lesbians to develop effective defensive strategies throughout their lives, which are also useful in coping with the effects of aging [13]. Many authors indicate that the support network built by lesbians throughout their lives is a significant protective factor in experiencing aging [14, 15]. Some researchers also see the impact of the feminist movement, which opposed the idealization of the slim body [13]. Hence, there is less pressure on lesbians to maintain normative female attractiveness.

The second perspective points to difficulties and limitations in the aging process of non-heterosexual women. The existing international literature indicates that members of this group may experience multiple discrimination based on age, gender and sexual orientation [7, 9, 16]. This means that these individuals may simultaneously experience ageism [17], including within the LGBTQ+ community [8], sexism and homophobia/biphobia [7]. Such intersectional discrimination exacerbates the marginalization of older lesbians both within the lesbian community and beyond [8]. A consequence of this is the social invisibility of older lesbians, understood here as stereotypical casting in the role of a grandmother regardless of family situation [17], the assumption that older lesbians are not objects of desire (“desexualization”) [17], and above all, the lack of social and media representations [14, 17, 18].

In the process of aging, women experience complex and sometimes contradictory feelings related to their bodies and changing physicality [19]. This refers to body image, a theoretical construct understood as perceptions, thoughts, and feelings related to the body and bodily experience [20]. Previous studies indicate that older women simultaneously hold negative and positive body images [21]. Nonetheless, existing research on body image has focused on heterosexual women, without considering the possible impact of sexual orientation/identity on perceiving body aging and assigning meaning to it in later life [22]. The limited literature on how non-heterosexual women cognitively and emotionally perceive their bodies suggests they experience a conflict between external socio-cultural demands and their own internal needs [23]. Western culture and its norms regarding female beauty influence the shaping of women’s bodies, including lesbians [23]. While social transformations and increased acceptance of non-heterosexual individuals allow older lesbian, bisexual and queer women to lead authentic lives in their bodies, heterosexist narratives, as well as experiences of discrimination due to gender and age, can negatively affect their functioning [22].

Nazarpour et al. [24] noted that menopause is one of the factors shaping body image during this period. Their research findings suggest that interventions aimed at alleviating symptoms can improve body image in individuals experiencing menopause.

There is a growing number of studies on the different experiences reported by non-heterosexual women during the menopausal period compared to heterosexual women [25–27]. Some of these indicate that lesbians cope with the experience of menopause better than heterosexual women due to better communication in the relationship and greater understanding from their partner [25].

Aim

Considering the above findings, it seems justified to explore the meanings that older non-heterosexual women living in Poland attribute to menopause and the aging process. The following research question was posed: how do non-heterosexual women of middle and older age experience body image in the context of aging and menopause?

In this article, the author explores the experiences of lesbians in middle and older age in the context of experiencing aging, menopause, and analyzes the significance the respondents attribute to their life experiences in the context of negative and positive body image, as well as gender expression and experienced sexual identity.

Material and method

Methodological orientation

Researchers engaging in empirical studies within an interpretative approach believe that the methods they use, such as participant observation, biography and narrative analysis, and conducting interviews in respondents’ environments, will enable a more insightful understanding of an individual’s functioning in the context of specific social roles [28]. The interpretative paradigm allows for the creation of descriptions of social phenomena from the level of individual experiences. The study utilized a qualitative method. The starting point were individual narratives of women developed from a phenomenological perspective, in line with Nowak-Dziemianowicz’s statement [29, p. 60] that “by living, experiencing, a person interprets the occurring events as specific stories. This enables their own understanding of the events unfolding around them, including those related to their own actions.” The phenomenological approach also captured how respondents understand and negotiate the meaning of concepts such as “body relationship,” “femininity,” or “aging.”

Study group and research tools

Due to difficulties in reaching the group of older non-heterosexual women, participants were recruited using various methods, employing a non-probabilistic selection. The recruitment process began with contacting LGBTQ+ organizations, then posters were placed in public spaces such as universities or cafes. Announcements were also made on social media. However, the most effective strategies were the snowball method and direct contact with individuals potentially meeting the sample selection criteria.

As the motivations for participating in the study, the participants mentioned, among others: increasing the visibility of this group both in society and within the LGBTQ+ community itself; the desire to reflect on their own life experiences, and curiosity about how other non-heterosexual women live.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that lasted from 90 to 150 minutes and took place either in person (12 participants) or online (13 participants) at the homes or workplaces of the participants. The conversations were conducted from December 2021 to June 2023. The author acquainted the participants with a script that included a list of potential topics and questions. The interviews began with the question: “What does old age mean to you?”, and additional questions included: “What signs of aging have you noticed?”, “How do you experience the process of aging of the body?”, “How do you assess your relationship with your body today, and how was it before?”, “How would you describe your sexual identity today?”.

Due to limited access to a diverse study group, similar to other studies, most participants were well-educated, middle-aged, and white [7]. Two of the participants had a nationality other than Polish, but have been living in Poland for over 15 years. Most respondents came from large agglomerations, but a few lived in towns with up to 20,000 residents. Therefore, for the safety and data protection of the participants, information on the place of residence remains anonymized. The demographic characteristics of the study group are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. **Characteristics of the participants**

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Single/In a Relationship	Sexual Identity
Kaja	53	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Bisexual
Adela	61	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Lesbian
Róża	61	Higher (PhD)	In a relationship	Lesbian
Joanna	52	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Bisexual
Izda	52	Higher (PhD)	In a relationship	Monogamous Lesbian
Kamila	51	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Cis
Aniela	53	Higher (Master's)	Single	Lesbian
Klaudia	58	Higher (PhD)	In a relationship	Queer
Laura	52	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Lesbian
Emilia	51	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Lesbian
Pamela	57	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Lesbian
Andżelika	67	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Bisexual/Lesbian
Marzena	59	Higher (PhD)	In a relationship	Queer
Lidia	54	Higher (Master's)	Single	Lesbian
Martyna	50	Secondary	Single	Lesbian
Bernadetta	56	Higher (Master's)	Single	Lesbian

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Natasza	54	Higher (Bachelor's)	In a relationship	Lesbian
Marcelina	51	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Lesbian
Izabela	59	Higher (Master's)	Single	Lesbian
Sandra	54	Higher (Master's)	Single	Homosexual
Oktawia	52	Higher (PhD)	In a relationship	Person
Oliwia	51	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Two-spirit
Oksana	54	Secondary	In a relationship	Lesbian/Bisexual
Klementyna	52	Higher (Master's)	Single	Lesbian
Krzysztofa	50	Higher (Master's)	In a relationship	Bisexual

The criteria for participation in the study were being aged 50 years or older and declaring a non-heterosexual orientation or a non-heteronormative identity (lesbians, bisexual, pansexual individuals, and women without a defined identity who had experiences in relationships with the same sex). Trans women were not included in the study because research indicates that this group faces unique challenges in the aging process [30], which would require separate consideration. The minimum age of the respondents was related to the average age at which women in Poland undergo menopause [31] and was rounded down. This phenomenon, apart from hormonal changes, also brings about changes in psychosocial functioning [32, 33].

A total of twenty-five individuals aged between 50 and 67 participated in the study, with a mean age of $\mu = 54.3$ and a median age of 53. The author assigned each participant a pseudonym, generating random names using an application. The women showed a wide diversity in terms of age, level of education, current occupation, relationship status, and sexual identity (Table 1). Referring to the classification proposed by Diamond [34], the sample included women with stable sexual identities, fluid identities, as well as those who have never adopted a non-heterosexual identification. It was observed that several women were averse to the term “lesbian” and decided not to use it in reference to themselves. Although lesbian intellectual traditions encompass a broad understanding of lesbian identity as having political, intersectional features, and including various sexual and gender identities [35, 36], for the sake of terminological consistency and respect for the diverse identifications of the respondents, the term “non-heterosexual women” will be used in this article. The author will adhere to the nomenclature proposed by the authors of the cited articles.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The author followed the procedure proposed for researchers employing thematic analysis [37]. Each transcript was read line by line, with notes made alongside to capture preliminary categories. The author initially coded and analyzed the qualitative data. Patterns emerging from the data and

basic units of meaning were then identified. An inductive approach in thematic analysis was utilized, meaning that the identified themes are closely related to the data itself. Thematic analysis involves the process of identifying, examining and documenting patterns (i.e., themes) within a data set. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents a level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.

Applying an interpretative perspective, the author aimed to determine how older lesbians view their own aging, experience menopause and changes in their bodies. The goal was to access the meanings that respondents assign to experiences related to aging, including the motivations behind attitudes and behaviors [38].

The researcher's reflections

The primary task of the researcher in qualitative projects is to attempt to gain access to the thoughts and feelings of the study participants [39]. It means that the attitude and character of the researcher can influence the obtained material and its quality. A reflective approach by researchers does not involve ignoring their own biases, which is difficult to achieve. Bias and subjectivity are not considered negative here but are inherent elements of the research [39]. It is worth acknowledging the interaction between the participant and the researcher because this relationship significantly affects the research results [38].

The respondents were aware of this and consistently sought to determine the researcher's intentions and the purpose of her project. During the interviews, participants frequently asked about the researcher's identity or sexual orientation. Often, during the recruitment process, asked if the researcher was "one of us" or "from the community." The purpose of these questions was to ensure that the gathered information would not be misinterpreted or used against the lesbian community.

The distrust characterizing the representatives of this group should not be surprising, given the conservative and oppressive socio-political climate in which the respondents were raised, as well as the ongoing invisibility of aging non-heterosexual women within the LGBTQ+ community itself¹. Furthermore, the diverse experiences of women with mental health professionals and institutional representatives have taught them to be cautious when sharing personal stories, especially with heterosexual individuals. Therefore, recommendations from women who participated in the study and referred it to their friends were a significant part of recruiting additional respondents. Considering this, to maintain credibility, the author decided to disclose her sexual identity and personal circumstances to the respondents.

¹ Joanna Struzik [53] writes more about the sociocultural context of Polish lesbians and bisexual women from the 1970s to the present day in the report *Invisible (to the) Community: The Social Situation of lesbians and bisexual women living in rural areas and small towns in Poland*.

Ethical Issues

The study is part of the doctoral project *Sexual Identity and Life Satisfaction of Non-Heterosexual Women Aged 50+*, which received a positive opinion from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Gdansk.

Each respondent was informed before the study about its form of an in-depth, free-form biographical interview. The participants were provided with an interview guide containing the main topics around which the conversation would revolve. It allowed them to familiarize themselves with the subjects that might be discussed during the interview and decide whether they were interested in participating. This approach aimed to minimize concerns and anxiety about potential intrusion into privacy. It was emphasized that during the study, questions might be asked about issues related to psychosexual development, family, past and present romantic relationships, attitudes toward aging and the aging body, and experiences of discrimination at various stages of life. However, it was clearly stated that the interviewee could interrupt the interview without explaining. They were also informed that they could skip any question and terminate the interview without providing reasons.

Each respondent signed a declaration of informed consent before the study commenced. A few women requested the authorization of their quoted statements. To minimize the risk of revealing the interviewees' data to third parties, only the author was involved in the recruitment stage, debriefing, conducting the interviews, transcribing the recordings, and analyzing the research material.

Results

Through thematic analysis, two main themes were identified that could impact the assessment of the aging process and body image: "Menopause as Reintegration with the Body" and "Farewell to Heteronormative Femininity." The first theme has an intrapsychic character, and the second is mixed: interpersonal and intrapsychic. Given its specificity, the issue of nonbinary lesbianism was decided to be described as a separate subcategory by the author. Quotes from respondents' statements were used to describe the results. Fragments that reflect the specificity of the theme and at the same time indicate the diversity of attitudes and experiences of the study participants were selected.

Table 2. Code tree

Menopause as reintegration with the body	Farewell to heteronormative femininity
Observation of natural changes	Nonbinary lesbianism
Emotional maturity	Decline of the male gaze
Physical activity as a solution to psychosomatic and somatic problems	Acceptance of one's body

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Awareness of one's limitations	Various forms of femininity in lesbian spaces
Sense of unity of mind and body	Acceptance of non-normative bodies
Turn to spirituality (yoga and meditation)	Lower social expectations
Natural medicine	Distance to heteronormative women
Letting go related to fatigue and insomnia	Playing with image
Support from other women in understanding menopausal symptoms	

Menopause as reintegration with the body

Each of the 25 respondents reflected on the physiological, psychological and social changes associated with menopause. Three women had not yet undergone menopause but noticed changes in their bodies such as decreased skin firmness, fatigue, or a slower metabolism. One woman underwent artificial menopause as a result of surgical treatment in early adulthood. It is important to emphasize the diversity in the intensity and bothersomeness of menopausal symptoms within the studied group. The women reported a wide spectrum of symptoms considered universal during the climacteric period, including somatic, vasomotor, psychological, and sexual symptoms [32]. Some study participants noted that previously, the relationship with their body and care for its condition was not important to them. Entering the menopausal period made women become more attentive to mood changes, circadian rhythm disorders, or fatigue. Three women opted for hormone replacement therapy. Most women chose natural, non-invasive methods – according to them – to alleviate menopausal symptoms. Regardless of whether the end of menstruation was associated with relief or concern, respondents emphasized the necessity of change in daily functioning:

Menopause made me realize that without such cooperation with the body, caring for it, I wouldn't get far. It showed me, now here I have a lot to do, that I need to take care, engage with it, that I need to take an interest. So it's such a unity, there's no duality here, and if there is, it will work to my detriment. (Natasza)

Natasza struggled with insomnia and hot flashes for many months, only physical activity brought the expected relief. She points to a holistic view of the organism. The respondent also highlights the separation of the body from the mind at earlier stages of life, which gives a sense of “body estrangement”, and then the need for its integration in the face of experienced symptoms.

Many respondents indicate that yoga, as well as breathing and meditation practices, play a key role in achieving mental and physical well-being. Some women indicated that this type of exercise alleviated menopausal symptoms. Here a respondent talks about the process of body acceptance supported by affirmative practices:

I've been doing this breathing yoga and the art of living, diets and so on for 1.5 year now and I'm learning, learning to feel good with my body, right? Like when I do practice. it includes, among other things, accepting myself, accepting all the cells of my body, the whole body, billions of cells just as they are. (Izabela)

Some of the women note that there is a growing interest in their surroundings in spiritual practices and goddess beliefs, which emphasize the essence of the unity of mind and body. These also serve as an additional source of support and inspiration in understanding their own femininity. Turning to spirituality and mindfulness can also be understood as an alternative strategy to the social pressure surrounding menopause. How this strategy makes the experience of menopause easier is described by one of the participants:

Yes, I think there's a lot of tension around this phenomenon, efforts to fight it and cure it, while my experience is that you need to let go and change the rhythm. And these are my personal thoughts, somewhat coming from conversations with various women. Also with those, I collectively call them, witches, i.e., people who deal with natural medicine or have such knowledge, I would say, at the border of natural and traditional medicine, but more towards the natural. (Izyda)

The statement highlights the theme of support and the transfer of knowledge about menopause from more “initiated” women. They serve as a source of information, especially for symptoms of unjustified – according to the respondents – fatigue or decreased libido. This person helping in understanding and coping with menopausal symptoms, which seems significant in the context of same-sex relationships, is often the partner herself. Menopause becomes a kind of rite of passage that marks another stage of life. One of the women organized a party for her friends on this occasion:

I thought that this is also a change, just in the other direction. And that such old age, adulthood or maturity or whatever, should also be celebrated, and above all, it needs to be talked about. Say that you have menopause, because it's such a word that, you know, is whispered about, or women talk about it quietly among themselves. And I think, you know, it needs to come out into the discourse in some way, to become a neutral word. (Marzena)

Marzena addresses the topic of negative beliefs and attitudes surrounding menopause, which women internalize, also related to the end of the reproductive period. She points out the way narratives around menopause are constructed, which can still be a reason for women who have stopped menstruating to experience shame. Marzena had emphasized in an earlier statement that just as culturally the first menstruation is a reason for celebration, so menopause can mark the beginning of another developmental stage in a woman's life. This attitude is not isolated. In the narratives of

respondents, societal expectations of how a woman should behave and look diminish with age, translating into a greater sense of personal freedom:

And when I finally got menopause and decided that now is the time, that one kinda drops out of the vanity fair, I relaxed and started to actually like my body, when I'm a bit fatter, and so what? I just don't have to. Like put this body on display. (Sandra)

I register it more like: "Oh, okay, so this is how it is now, let's see how it is for me," but it also didn't have such a huge importance. I feel more and more mature, but also I think mentally, it also has a very nice effect for me. I feel it more as something natural that happens. I will live through it, but also I'm a bit observing. (Pamela)

The statements indicate a positive attitude towards menopause understood as a developmental, natural event [33]. This allows for the acceptance of changes in the body, observing them with greater distance, even if it means foregoing the fulfillment of social esthetic norms.

Farewell to heteronormative femininity

In the respondents' statements, heteronormativity was recognized in the context of experienced gender roles and expressions, where the main pattern of sexual relationships is a heterosexual couple [41], and heterosexuality constitutes the dominant sexual identity. This term is used in discussions about sexuality, in gender studies and queer studies, referring to the ways social institutions and gender roles function [42]. Non-heteronormativity would thus relate to a loosening of the social gender dichotomy [43]. A woman who previously lived in a long-term relationship with a man discusses how heteronormativity can become a key aspect in perceiving one's body:

I can't say that it's the result of aging, rather saying goodbye to the heteronorm was a key experience for me and very surprising. [...] However, [...] moving from a relationship with a man to a relationship with a woman definitely changed my attitude towards physicality. [...] being with a woman, with my partner, I began to look at, I would say, ostentatiously heterosexual women, I began to look with complete disbelief. (Izyda)

Entering into a same-sex relationship not only changed her perspective on experiencing her own body but also created a distance from women who follow common beauty standards and do this – implicitly – for men. A woman who can be described as someone with a stable lesbian identity shares similar reflections:

Actually, in some sense, it hardly concerns me, and I think it's because of non-heteronormativity. When I meet 50+ [heteronormative] women, they are in such terrible condition. In such condition that men don't

look at them, that they are not attractive. In the lesbian circles, it doesn't really matter whether you are unattractive, because there's, for example, some phobia, no. It doesn't matter. As a cis-lesbian, you can be unattractive, but age!? Really, I feel like it doesn't matter to me. (Laura)

Laura contrasts the heteronormative world with the non-heteronormative one. From her perspective, heteronormative women struggle with the aging process because they remain under the pressure of the male gaze, which negatively impacts how they perceive their own attractiveness. There is also a certain idealization of the lesbian community, which would be free from ageism and judgments based on appearance. In Laura's view, distancing oneself from heteronormative expectations translates into a sense of personal freedom and agency:

When you leave that behind, you're free. You can look how you want, it's only up to you [...] in the sense that you can start experimenting, negotiating with yourself, measuring up, or, I don't know, performing, where you want to be and how you want to make yourself. (Laura)

In the narratives of these women, saying goodbye to heteronormative femininity also means limiting practices that support the creation of a typical female gender role or allow for maintaining a younger appearance, such as makeup, surgical treatments, or hair care [19]. The respondent highlights how her approach to cosmetic treatments changed over time:

When I was very young, I really cared about being liked, being beautiful. [Today] when I put makeup on, it seems to me like I have a mask on my face. [...] I stopped dyeing my hair. But I don't think it's in the context of stopping to take care of myself, rather it seems to me that I started to accept it more because, for example, it seems to me that my dark hair, that I have a very nice hair color and I don't know why I ever dyed it, right? (Krzysztofa)

Krzysztofa sees the cessation of certain practices as stemming from greater self-acceptance and acceptance of her body, which came with age. Her relationship with her body was previously restrictive; she followed diets and adhered to esthetic norms.

Negotiating gender identity – nonbinary lesbianism

In the narratives of the participants, non-heteronormativity also refers to issues of gender identification. According to Hord [44], inspired by queer theory, the questioning of gender binarity and the associated social changes make constructing sexual identity based on this dichotomy problematic. The author also points to the inevitable interaction between lesbian specificity and nonbinary gender ideology under current social conditions, leading to inevitable transformations at the individual level as well.

The construct of nonbinary lesbianism is an expression of these tensions, as it combines a nonbinary gender identity with lesbian identification, for which femininity is an important point of reference [44]. One of the participants discusses this dissonance:

So, I have this not entirely conscious nonbinary nature in myself, right under my skin, although I would never loudly say, “knock, knock on the wood” and I’m saying here, that I am nonbinary, because I could not betray the lesbian option, nor could I betray the female experience. [...] if I said I was nonbinary, it would be like saying that the female, what women experienced: my grandmothers, mother blah blah, thousands of women I know, which is extremely important to me and also was important in the relations of getting to know women who are not from my bubble, so-called hetero women, but very open to me, that I can’t imagine that I could not have this common denominator with them: “we are women.” (Emilia)

Emilia clearly emphasizes that the sense of belonging to the group of women, also in a transgenerational context, becomes more important than revealing her real gender identity. It is crucial that the respondent herself sees a conflict between these two identities and feels compelled to hide one of them. Similarly, Aniela talks about her attachment to feminist ideas despite lacking a female gender identification:

My femininity is a problem for me. I would prefer to be unisex really. I have reconciled biologically with my femininity, that “oh! this body is female,” but socially it has no meaning. Only that, of course, I misspoke, [...] because I am, as I said, also a feminist, that is a woman in the sense that I believe women are treated worse. But whether I fully fit into this femininity as myself, I am also not entirely sure. Maybe I am more of an observer of this situation, so I stand on the side of fighting women, but I don’t necessarily put myself into this group, right? (Aniela)

Aniela is skeptical about her own femininity, while also presenting herself as an ally for women’s rights. She also mentions her indifferent attitude towards her body, particularly towards her breasts. The category she feels best describes her is “unisex.”

These statements reflect a sense of disorientation and uncertainty towards one’s own body and the need to define one’s gender identity. As Emilia’s statement shows, this can lead to self-exclusion. It is also important to consider the context of the development of language for non-heteronormative identities, which has allowed women to find an adequate or close identification throughout their lives:

There weren’t such categories named back then. It wasn’t talked about so much. I wasn’t so interested in this topic either. But no, I was completely, I saw myself outside of any categories rather than identifying with some other, not as a woman. Not a fish, not a fowl,

not a woman, not a man... Completely not fitting into anything.
(Klementyna)

Discussion of results

The study focused on analyzing the narratives of non-heterosexual women of middle and older age in the context of body image, aging and menopause. Adaptive strategies related to physiological changes and a positive body image, despite the persistence of menopausal symptoms, were identified. Participants were also found to have significant resilience to societal expectations in terms of perceived attractiveness and sexuality. This aligns with the conclusions of researchers who claim that crisis management skills, which involved experiencing discrimination throughout life, can be transferred to coping with the challenges of aging [7, 12, 45]. Some women view menopause as a pivotal moment significant for their relationship with their body, reinforced by spiritual and meditative practices.

The narratives repeatedly touch on the theme of increased interest in spirituality during the peri-menopausal period, which should not be conflated with commonly understood religiosity. These results are consistent with studies based on respondents' relationships, which highlight the ritualistic nature of this event and attribute transformative significance to it [46, 47]. Many women emphasized the naturalness of menopause, a process that can be observed and experienced without the use of synthetic hormones or other medical interventions. This aligns with previous findings that menopause is a natural part of the aging process for women [48], and support and knowledge from other women are important in experiencing menopause [32, 33].

Women's narratives predominantly featured positive attitudes towards their own bodies, although there were also threads of dissatisfaction and the necessity of maintaining fitness and a slim figure due to having a younger partner. This partially aligns with the observations of Benett et al. [22], where a lack of body satisfaction was identified among participants, alongside gratitude and pride in later age. This study confirms the thesis repeated by many researchers that the lesbian community is characterized by great openness and acceptance of diverse forms of femininity [7, 36]. Limiting beauty care practices and ignoring or overlooking the role of men in evaluating their own attractiveness was associated with an awareness of heteronormative esthetic standards towards women. Factors influencing body acceptance, as also reported by respondents in this study, include resilience, self-esteem, and indirectly, social support [49]. This observation was particularly emphasized when differentiating between lesbian and gay environments [13]. However, these observations contradict Kelly's findings [23], which question the belief that lesbians are more open to a diverse shape and size of the female body. This difference may result from the sample's characteristics and a developmental perspective. In Kelly's studies [23], participants were on average 12 years younger than the respondents in this study, who do not deny the influence of Western European beauty standards on perceiving

and caring for their bodies but emphasize that this impact clearly diminished in the aging process or in connection with menopause.

It is worth considering to what extent the positive attitude of the studied women towards menopause is related to adopting hormone replacement therapy or choosing other non-pharmacological strategies to cope with symptoms. Bielawska-Batorowicz [33], citing Anita Sikora-Szubert's master's thesis, emphasizes that using hormone replacement therapy does not affect the quality of life index, whereas factors such as physical activity, higher education level and social support can improve the quality of functioning in the peri-menopausal period. Considering that the group of older non-heterosexual women is potentially exposed to triple discrimination due to age, gender and sexual orientation/identity [7, 9, 16], when analyzing the positive attitudes of respondents towards aging and menopause, it is worth considering the phenomenon of self-group distancing. It is a defensive strategy involving psychological, physical and social detachment from a stigmatized group to which one belongs, towards a group of higher status to improve one's situation [50].

A notable result was the topic related to the gender diversity of the study group – nonbinary lesbianism [44]. When analyzing this theme, caution is needed due to potential overinterpretations. The topic was signaled because of its possible consequences for the body image and social functioning of older non-heterosexual women. Similar themes are found in studies based on thematic analysis, where authors discuss negotiating gender expression among older non-heterosexual women [22]. Some respondents experienced anxiety related to their identity because they did not want to undergo gender correction or masculinizing procedures, nor did they identify as transgender individuals. However, due to the heterosexist message [22] and the lack of access to inclusive language in earlier years, they could not define their identity. Today, despite possible identification, they experience a conflict between the gender expression and role they perform and their actual gender identity. This reflects a deeply rooted belief that lesbian identity is threatened by departing from binary gender [44]. This conflict may have become apparent only later in life when a woman in the development of non-heterosexual identity reached the stage of lesbian consciousness [51]. This dissonance, as well as a different view of cultural gender (gender) and sex (sex), is evident in the observations of academics involved in lesbian studies, who indicate that the concept of queer – refusal of clear boundaries, refusal of binarity, adoption of fluidity and variability remains problematic for many lesbians [52].

Limitations, strengths of the study and conclusions

While analyzing the results of this study, its limitations must be considered. The main limitations include: (a) the choice of a non-random sample, dominated by educated women from large urban centers, with an overrepresentation of people up to 55 years of age (this may be a result of using the snowball method as the main recruitment

method), (b) several participants either grew up abroad or are Polish and currently live in another country (this may complicate the identification of the Polish specificity of functioning of older non-heterosexual women), (c) Due to the sample size, subgroups were not distinguished in the study, e.g., women with a bisexual identity. Future studies should assume more specific groups, especially since researchers indicate significant differences in the functioning of lesbians and bisexual women [10].

However, the strengths of this study should be noted. Studies on non-heterosexual/non-heteronormative individuals in Poland mainly focus on young people aged 18–49 or teenagers. Moreover, women in the LGBTQ+ community are particularly under-represented in available data sets [17]. Therefore, it can be assumed that this is the first Polish qualitative study to address the issues of functioning of non-heterosexual women 50+. One of the prejudices associated with lesbianism assumes that sexuality is a key aspect of lesbians’ identity [8]. The author manages to avoid this stereotypical approach to non-heterosexual women by focusing on issues of body image, aging and menopause. Although the study has limited generalizability, it serves as a starting point for further research and primarily draws attention to the specificity of maturing and aging of non-heterosexual women.

The analysis of narratives allowed for the identification of two main themes: “Menopause as Re-integration with the Body” and “Farewell to Heteronormative Femininity,” which indicate the choice of adaptive strategies in coping with menopausal symptoms and the psychological, physiological and social consequences of changing body image. Respondents were also noted for their significant resilience to societal expectations regarding attractiveness and appearance care. The issue of nonbinary lesbianism was also considered, requiring further exploration and reflection due to its multifaceted nature.

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