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A qualitative insight into the experiences of naturists perceived stigma of naturism

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Abstract

Naturism has been gaining the interest of scholars as the numbers of those engaging in this behavior continue to grow. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that individuals who engage in naturism are being stigmatized. However, current research on this topic is limited and outdated. Furthermore, there are no previous empirical studies that have explored the experiences of individuals who engage in naturism and the perceived stigma surrounding it. The present study addresses this gap in the limited available literature on naturism. Ten participants were recruited via a convenience sampling method for this qualitative investigation. Rich and detailed data were collected using online semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of naturists and the perceived stigma associated with engagement in this behavior. Four themes emerged from a reflective thematic analysis of the collected data: *Naturist identity*; *Naturist community*; *Social acceptance*; *In the eyes of the outsiders*. The participants' discourse suggests that naturists experience high levels of perceived stigma and live their naturist identity behind closed doors. The findings of the present study can be utilized as a platform in which to generate more research on the experiences of individuals who engage in naturism and to further identify factors related to the perceived stigma attached to this behavior.

Keywords: Naturism; Stigma; Perceived Stigma; Qualitative; Reflective Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

The terms *nudism* and *naturism* are often used interchangeably to refer to individuals who choose to be cloth-free. However, those who identify as naturists (also referred to as naturalists) may choose to engage in this behavior for the purported health benefits [1]. Naturism has its roots in the ancient human history, as Greek Olympic athletes would compete naked [1]. Nudity was commonly practiced from a religious perspective, and it was described as an attempt to return to "the pure state of innocence" of Adam and Eve [1]. Additionally, some baptism practices involved complete nudity and several Christian sects engaged in social nudity both in public and private spaces [1].

Despite individuals frequently engaging in naturist activities, many Western societies have negative perceptions and attitudes towards naturism [2]. Social nudity is commonly seen as a deviant and offensive behavior [3] since members of society perceive naturism as a behavior that deviates from social norms and involves eroticism [4]. Preston-Whyte [5] states that "public nudity commonly carries with it a level of social opprobrium, largely shaped by religious dogma, which tends to be articulated through expressions of disgust, disapproval, and suspicion" (p.355). Thus, social attitudes towards naturism are commonly based on religious, conservative and moralist perspectives. These perspectives lead to members of the society labelling the behavior as sexually deviant, weird, creepy, senseless, depraved, immoral, indecent; and those who identify as naturists as perverts and pedophiles [6, 7, 8].

Engagement in naturist activities (e.g., social nudity) remained behind closed doors from early 1930s until the late 1960s [1]. The album named *Two Virgins* released by John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1968, which included a naked photo

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of them on the cover, retriggered the naturist movement and led to all beaches becoming cloth-optional in Denmark in 1969. Similar changes regarding naturism were also experienced in other Western nations during this period, as naturism became more common practice. Many other countries allow naturism and engaging in the behavior both on designated beaches and in public parks [1]. Currently, engaging in naturist activities is widely practiced in many European countries. However, it is important to bear in mind that there are many cultural differences amongst these countries.

For instance, Smith [9] suggests that German naturists are more body conscious, more sexualized and more modest. Hence, he suggests that they are *low context* naturists. Conversely, French naturists are considered to be *high context* due to being less body conscious, less sexualized and less modest [9]. The acceptance of engaging in social nudity has not been homogenous across cultures [10]. For example, there are countries that widely accept naturism, such as Germany, France, Spain, and Croatia. Whereas other countries have much stricter rules regarding naturist activity. More specifically, it is either considered as illegal, or at least confidential, to engage in social nudity in countries such as India, Thailand, and Morocco [11]. In addition to these opposing stances by different cultures, Mexico has witnessed a significant rise in the practice of naturism over the past two decades [10].

Naturist associations such as Vidanud and the Nudist Federation of Mexico have been openly promoting social nudity as an integrate part of their culture. As such, culture is considered to be an influential factor when it comes to exploring approaches and attitudes towards naturism and individuals who engage in the behavior [1].

Today, naturism is defined as practicing nudity in the presence of other individuals in public places without any intention of sexual stimulation [12, 13]. Engaging in naturism was an accepted part of everyday life in prehistoric times and into the Middle Ages [14]. However, in the postmodern and Western world, individuals view behaviors involving nudity as an immoral act [15]. Nevertheless, organized public nudity has been widely practiced in European societies (e.g., Germany, France, Switzerland, and England) [16]. Recently, naturism has been gaining more public attention due to events that promote it such as World Naked Bike Ride (WNBR) which takes place in various cities across the world (i.e., Amsterdam, London, Mexico-City, etc.), with thousands of individuals cycling naked through cities in order to highlight the vulnerability of cyclists [17]. In fact, polls conducted by Ipsos-Mori suggest that around 25% of individuals in Britain have taken part in some kind of nudist activity (e.g., nude sunbathing) between 2001 and 2011 [18].

There have been various attempts to define naturism, such as the celebration of the authentic human-nature relationship, an attempt to achieve and keep one's spiritual, mental, and physical health, and a way to re-ignite one's connections with the natural world [19]. Even though engaging in naturist activities has been linked to the ideology that it generated physical fitness and an appreciation of nature, many individuals still consider the behavior as an eccentric and/or comical one, which transgresses moral sensibilities and leads to labeling of those who identify as naturists as anti-citizens [20].

Within the Western societies, the idea of nakedness has been inseparable from sex and sexuality, and there have been immoral connotations attached with it [21]. Some individuals consider the act of engaging in non-sexual nudity as a voice to embody messages of liberation and a protest against the society [14, 22]. Engaging in naturist behavior has been conceptualized as a leisure activity, a cultural practice, and a lifestyle [12, 23]. Due to the practice of naturism holding a paradoxical position in Western society and the society viewing it to be morally ambiguous [19], engaging in naturist behavior may lead to complex interactions with other elements of the dominant cultures in which it is based [9], or raise concerns, such as the potential for eroticism [24]. One of the earliest studies conducted on naturism [25] suggests that self-improvement, recreation, and freedom were among the motivations behind individuals' decision to engage in naturist activities (e.g., naturist camps, beaches).

Even though organizations and naturist groups across the world relentlessly try to destigmatize the act of engaging in non-sexual nudity in public places (by organizing different types of activities such as: naturist book clubs, weekly discussion groups, life drawing sessions, naturist yoga sessions, cooking activities camping, body painting) the stigma towards naturists still exists in the society [26]. Nudity is considered a deviant behavior of some tourists [4]. Attitudes towards engaging in non-sexual nudity (e.g., naturist beaches, campsites, and other activities) vary across sociocultural contexts. Stigmatization can occur at any point when certain individuals label certain behaviors or characteristics of other members of the society as offensive [27]. A behavior which might be stigmatized in a certain social context may not be stigmatized under other conditions [28]. This highlights the importance of cultural beliefs when it comes to defining which behaviors and/or attitudes are stigmatized [29]. In addition, stigma might change over time; more specifically, stigma towards a behavior might increase, decrease, or remain stable [30].

Various minority social groups can feel stigmatized within their society [31]. Stigma within a society can manifest itself in diverse ways and differ on a case-by-case level. Stigmatized individuals might be excluded from society and may even experience punishment for their differences [16]; but its sources tend to be similar [32]. Majority groups within a society can hold negative opinions about diverse groups such as those from different ethnic backgrounds [31], women [33], individuals viewed as visually unattractive [34], people with disfigurements [35], individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities [36], gay [37] and transgender people [38], individuals who engage in self-harming behavior [39] and those who are diagnosed with mental illness [40].

Stigma is a complex concept which encompasses individual experience and the interaction between groups [41]. Stigma is an attribute which links an individual to undesirable stereotypes, which leads other people to reduce the bearer from a whole and common individual to a discounted one [42]. As a consequence, individuals who experience stigma are exposed to negative attitudes such as fear, blame, hostility, and discrimination (unfair treatment, segregation, exclusion) from other members of society [41]. Individuals who feel stigmatized might suffer from two different types of stigmas: *personal* and *perceived* stigma [43]. Personal stigma focuses on one's own belief towards a behavior [42, 44]. The term perceived stigma on the other hand involves an individual's beliefs about the negative attitudes of other people on a certain behavior [45, 46]. Furthermore, perceived stigma might be linked to restrictions in social activities [47, 48] and negative interactions between members of a society [49, 50, 51]. The level of perceived stigma and vigilance are positively correlated, thus the higher the level of perceived stigma, the higher the need to be vigilant in interactions with other dominant group members [52]. Individuals with higher levels of perceived stigma might adjust their behavior in order to avoid negative reactions from other members of the society by avoiding public places [53, 54, 55]. Moreover, to avoid potentially negative attitudes from other individuals, the stigmatized individuals or groups might avoid being present in unwanted places [53]. As such, this might lead to exclusion of stigmatized individuals from the general public and cause them to behave in a vigilant state when interacting with other members of the society. Findings from a cross cultural study with over 80000 participants from 16 countries, suggest that perceived stigma is strongly associated with mental disorders [56].

Research on stigma has focused on both individual and contextual analysis of stigma and the prejudice related to it; thus, its definition has drawn upon several different paradigms [57]. The terms stigma, discrimination and prejudice are strongly interlinked in the existing literature, with stigma and discrimination being used interchangeably, which highlights the fact that their existence in isolation is questionable [58]. Furthermore, stigmatized groups are conscious of the negative stereotypes and discrimination that are formed against them [59]. Thus, these stigmatized individuals are more likely to develop negative concepts of themselves either due to the specific individuals they interact with holding negative attitudes towards them or due to the other members of their group being generally devalued in the society [59]. Earlier literature has presented empirical evidence which suggests that beliefs about stigma have a negative impact on employment opportunities, self-esteem, and quality of life [60-64]. Finally, negative beliefs and fear may have detrimental consequences by causing individuals who are stigmatized to avoid contact with non-stigmatized members of the society, or uncomfortable social interactions [65], lower life satisfaction [66], discrimination in professional life and even loss of income [67, 68].

There are various behaviors that might lead individuals to feel stigmatized by other members of society. However, any behavior can become stigmatized overtime and the existing literature is currently limited in terms of the range of behaviors that have been considered in relation to stigma [69]; with a dearth of published evidence on the stigma surrounding naturism.

Aims of the current study

Anecdotal evidence in mainstream social media on naturists' experiences of feeling stigmatized highlights that individuals hold negative beliefs towards naturism. This present piece of qualitative research was conducted to add flavor and rigor to the anecdotal evidence on naturism. Overall, the study aimed to gain a detailed and rich understanding of the lived experiences of naturists. The overarching research question was: *What are the lived experiences of individuals who engage in naturism and to what extent do they feel stigmatized?* The key objective of the present study was to gain insight into the lived experiences of those who engage in naturist activities and to fully explore perceived stigma towards naturism.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Design

The present study was qualitative in nature. Qualitative research focuses on gaining insight into how individuals make sense of the world around them and their experiences of it [70]. Many studies aim to explore opinions, beliefs, experiences, and attitudes of things in the outer world [71] and are appropriate to explore using qualitative methods [72]. There are different approaches to qualitative research. To elucidate, Little Q qualitative research utilizes qualitative methods within a quantitative paradigm in order to support hypotheses [70]. On the other hand, Big Q qualitative research is conducted within a qualitative research paradigm and embraces the multiplicity and subjectivity of interpretations [73]. Big Q research usually takes an inductive approach to limit the researcher's imposition of meanings, values onto the experiences shared by the participants [70]. As such, a Big Q research paradigm is well suited to the current investigation of the phenomenon, as its principal aim is to identify, explore and understand the subjective experiences of the individuals.

2.2. Participants

A sample of ten adults who identified as naturists were interviewed in this study. All participants were given pseudonyms, and their personal details were removed from transcripts to protect their identity. Further sampling was ruled out as it was decided that saturation was reached at this point and collecting further data would not add to the breadth and depth of the themes and analysis.

2.3. Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee prior to the collection of data. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview that lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded to help with the transcription process. While conducting the interviews, handwritten content and process notes were taken. All participants were briefed prior to and debriefed after the online interviews took place. As the conducted interviews were semi-structured in nature, the interview schedule was held loosely, which served more as a guide than a prescriptive set of questions. Prompts were utilized to provide the participants with the opportunity to further elaborate and facilitate a more thorough exploration of their experiences.

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a useful method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting on core themes within datasets [74]. Furthermore, it helps to generate themes that can explain and gain insight into a phenomenon [75, 76]. It is possible to use TA to gain a rich and in-depth understanding of a dataset and to explore key themes. However, gaining a broad description of the dataset instead of exploring the individual cases from an idiographic perspective may be particularly relevant especially when it comes to examining an under-researched phenomenon [74]. As such, the aim in the present study was to identify and understand broad patterns of experience of the participants across the dataset.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is an accessible and theoretically flexible approach which is interpretative in its nature [77]. Its fundamental aim is to facilitate the identification and analysis of patterns within a data set [78]. This reflexive approach to TA puts an emphasis on the active role of the researcher when it comes to producing knowledge [79]. As such, codes are considered as a representation of the researcher's interpretations of patterns of meaning within the dataset [77]. The coding process and development of themes is flexible and organic [79], which contributes to the familiarity with the dataset and may lead to interpretation of new patterns of meaning [77].

Through the analytic process with RTA, it is important for the researcher to be cognizant that the analysis is not a linear process of moving through each step [79]. Instead, the researcher is required to move back and forth between the six-step analytic process as required, which can further lead to new interpretations of the dataset and require further iterations of previous phases [79].

Therefore, the collected datasets were firstly familiarized prior to generating codes and searching for emergent themes. Through a recursive process of familiarization with the data, coding and theme generation, the potential themes that emerged were rearranged and refined. The candidate themes that did not relate directly to the research questions were set aside. Some themes were disregarded as they were not supported by enough data. Consequently, all data extracts were reviewed in order to define the themes.

The four key dimensions of rigor were abided by ensuring sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance [80]. These criteria were adhered to when assessing the quality and validity of this study, as they supply a framework to assess quality within the wider context of qualitative research.

3. Discussion of Findings

The core aim of this study was to gain a detailed, rich, and in-depth understanding of the perceived stigma towards naturism experienced by those who engage in naturism. As shown in Table 1., four central themes emerged, following a reflexive thematic analysis of data that was collected through online semi-structured interviews. The four key themes were: *Naturist identity*; *Naturist community*; *Social acceptance* and *In the eyes of the outsiders*.

Table 1 Emergent Themes

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative quote
Naturist Identity	Living life on eggshells	<i>"Because of my job at a primary school, I tend not to mention being a naturist as a whole. And so, when I go to an event, um, in both of the naked bike rides, we used body paint, we wore wigs and had some glasses, so we were not recognized."</i>
	Negative experiences of naturists	<i>"Well, there was one occasion at a naked bike ride, when somebody, um who was sat outside the pub threw a glass of beer over one of the riders and started shouting that we were all perverts."</i>
Naturist Community	Being part of a minority group	<i>"There's an awful lot of unreasonable behavior and it's not to some extent, not purely because we're naturists just because people are looking for something to get angry about and we were perhaps a convenient target. It could have been, you know transexuals. It could've been attacking, uhm, people of different ethnic group...I think it was – it is just an excuse to vent some anger."</i>
	Living in the naturist bubble	<i>"I always get the feeling when I go to a naturist beach, there's more of a feeling of community there there's a kind of a feeling that you will have the at least one thing in common..."</i>
Social Acceptance	Being out of the closet	<i>"I am not confident about what their reaction would be, and once you have said it you cannot unsay it, and I think, you know, people might look at look at me in a different way."</i>
	Strength in numbers	<i>"Mass naked things are different. I did the 'Spencer Tunick' thing, where there were around 4000 naturists being photographed as a group, and nobody found that offensive. On the contrary, it was an art movement."</i>
In the Eyes of Outsiders	False beliefs	<i>"There is an assumption that if you are naked and other people are naked around you, then you will be, ...you will have an erection."</i>
	Engrained associations	<i>"Well, he <God> created all of us that way in the beginning. According to the Bible he had no issue with it. We are the only ones who actually have developed an issue with it and if the Bible says that we are created in the image of God, that our bodies are whole and good then actually hiding them away is actually the hiding the image of God within us."</i>

3.1. Theme 1: Naturist identity

3.1.1. Sub-Theme 1.1: Living Life on Eggshells

The first sub-theme captures the aspect of cautiousness of individuals who identify as naturists due to their attempts at keeping themselves safe from negative treatment. Participants' discourses highlighted their fear of being stigmatized due to their naturist identity. Participants expressed that they take precautions when engaging in the behavior to make sure that they are not caught red-handed during their engagement. As a result of this, individuals who engage in naturism live their life on eggshells and go through life with a constant fear. For many participants, this fear seems to exist in both their personal and professional lives, which might lead to naturists actively choosing to hide their engagement in the behavior to avoid suffering from the possible negative consequences due to their identity.

Participants shared that the naturist community as a whole tends to engage in the behavior behind closed doors. Participants elaborated on the fact that the naturist clubs try to keep themselves safe from members of the community by building around a setting which will not get any attention from the outsiders.

According to British Naturism [81], there are almost 200 naturist clubs and organizations in the United Kingdom. Additionally, a Google™ search using ‘naturist clubs in the United Kingdom’ brings up more than five million search results. A thorough look through these results suggests that the media representation of local and national newspapers and journals use words such as hidden community [82], nestled away [83], gated community [84], secluded [85].

This resistance of being part of a wider community and allowing individuals to live their naturist identities freely might trigger a segregation within the community and lead to individuals suffering from expected discrimination from members of the society. However, it might be possible to consider that this fear is triggered by the presence of negative anecdotal evidence surrounding naturism.

3.1.2. Sub-Theme 1.2: Negative Experiences of Naturists

The second sub-theme added flavor to the anecdotal evidence about negative beliefs towards naturists by capturing their negative lived experiences. These experiences were derived from a lack of tolerance from counterparts who neither identify as naturists, nor engage in the behavior. Although participants reported never experiencing stigma as an individual, naturists from a collective perspective tended to feel stigmatized for engaging in this behavior. Given the sensitivity of the topic, some individuals might believe that their counterparts who do not engage in naturism may hold stigmatizing views about them and ingroup members. Negative experiences of other naturists can lead to heightened anxiety and tries to hide their naturist identity amongst those who have not faced direct negativity from the members of the society. As a result, the inability to live their true selves might lead naturists to experience lower levels of overall life satisfaction.

Participants reflected on their experience of taking part in naturist events and shared negative encounters they had with individuals who physically showed their negative beliefs towards the behavior. Participants’ discourse highlighted the intensity of naturists’ fear of experiencing physical harm for being a naturist. Witnessing negative experiences amongst members of one’s group, might lead to psychological distress of fellow group members.

Due to the rise in the use of social media, individuals are able to share their opinions regarding naturism more freely. As a consequence, individuals who identify as naturists go through negative experiences and bullying due to their engagement in the behavior [86], which perpetuates the social stigma towards it.

3.2. Theme 2: Naturist Community

3.2.1. Sub-Theme 2.1: Being Part of a Minority Group

This sub-theme, which sits within the main theme of *Naturist Community* captures the aspect of naturists’ feelings of being a minority group. Participants reported their feelings of belonging to a minority group. Additionally, participants elaborated on the importance of having a sense of belonging and being accepted by their ingroup. Participants reflected on the number of naturists in their social circle and compared themselves to other minority groups, such as those from different ethnic backgrounds, or sexual orientations. Their fear of judgment from those who do not belong to the same minority group, leads them to limit their social interactions and the extent of the information they share about themselves.

A minority group is commonly defined as a subgroup within societies with characteristics that are different from those who belong to a majority group [87]. The societal stigma and negative connotations surrounding this behavior may lead to individuals to not disclose their engagement with it. Given that any individual might choose to engage in naturism, without openly showing this aspect of their identity, leads to an insight about whether naturists should indeed be considered a minority group.

3.2.2. Sub-Theme 2.2: Living in the Naturist Bubble

This sub-theme illustrates the decision making of naturists to engage in the behavior within their close-knit community due to their feelings of comfort and lack of judgment from those who also share this common aspect of their identities. Minority groups within society commonly stand together. Standing with each other might contribute to their feelings of validation and meet their needs to be understood due to sharing common characteristics.

Participants in this study expressed that when they are at a naturist event, it is nice to know that they have one thing in common with every individual who is taking part in the event. When an individual is able to pinpoint similarities with other individuals around them, it might be easier to create a stable relationship with them.

Living life in a bubble, where there are others who share similar characteristics or interests might make it easier for individuals to relate to one another and lead to an increased satisfaction in their sense of self. Furthermore, living in a naturist bubble diminishes all possible threats that might stem from being a naturist. As such, engaging in activities with likeminded individuals could be seen as a coping mechanism with possible stigmatization.

Minority groups commonly choose to conceal aspects of their identities from their social circles [88]. Concealment is presumed to offer the individuals a sense of security [89]. However, it also imposes significant burdens on the individuals [90]. For instance, because of concealment, an individual might experience a reduction in their feelings of belongingness and authenticity [89]. As such, minority groups might choose to avoid contact with those who do not share similar characteristics.

Participants' discourses shed some light on how naturists experience minority stress and how this might interfere with their well-being. Furthermore, the experience of minority stress might discourage naturists from disclosing their identity. Similar to other groups who are seen as minorities within the society (those with different sexual orientations or ethnicities), those who engage in naturism might become more likely to conceal their naturist identity and live their lives in a bubble.

3.3. Theme 3: Social Acceptance

3.3.1. Sub-Theme 3.1: Being out of the Closet

This sub-theme sits within the wider theme of social acceptance and captures the decision of individuals being out of the naturist closet to live their naturist identity publicly in terms of advocating for and normalizing the behavior of naturism. Presence of individuals from a minority group might contribute to raising awareness of behaviors that are considered deviant. As such, participants reported the importance of living their naturist identity outside the closet in attempts to raise awareness towards the behavior.

Disclosing personal information about one's identity might lead to negative experiences within their social interactions and unwanted psychological distress [91]. Additionally, it causes the individual to be vigilant about whom they can interact with and how much information they can disclose [92]. The anxiety, possible condemnation by other individuals and fear of exposure might lead to significant amounts of stress.

Even if individuals do not hold stigmatizing views towards naturists, or the behavior, it is likely for naturists to avoid *coming out* to those in their social circles due to the uncertainty in measuring others' reactions. The inability to calculate the response from others in the society might be a determining factor in one's decision to stay *in the closet*.

Indeed, participants expressed their comfort in being out of the naturist closet by highlighting their devotion to promoting naturism and attempts to normalize the behavior. By raising awareness on a controversial behavior which might be linked to stigmatizing views, participants challenge the societal norms and encourage its acceptance. However, the level of acceptance towards the behavior might be linked to varied factors such as their social circle, environment, and location.

3.3.2. Sub-Theme 3.2: Strength in Numbers

A collective narrative in the interviews was the *Strength in Numbers* when it came to engaging in naturism. This sub-theme describes the impact of engaging in naturism as a large group in relation to acceptance towards the behavior. Individuals within a group have reciprocal influence on one another [93]. This influence paves the way to critical changes amongst group members throughout their interaction. Additionally, the number of individuals within a group might have an influence on the beliefs of others towards them.

The power imbalance amongst minority versus majority groups might signal to those who belong to a minority group might perceive threats in a more significant manner [94]. Furthermore, the increase in the numerical strength might enhance the minority group's identity in relation to those who belong to the outgroup [95]. Many participants report that they frequently engage in naturist activities such as the World Naked Bike Ride (WNBR), naturist get-togethers and events held by naturist organizations. Some of these events attract thousands of naturists. The WNBR, for instance, attracts more than a thousand individuals who ride their bikes in the nude in cities across the world. Even though, there

are some negative attitudes towards the large group of naked individuals' presence at this event, there are no reports of major conflicts with those who watch the event. Regardless of anecdotal evidence that suggests there may be negative attitudes towards naturism, there are some instances, where engaging in this behavior is considered to be acceptable. As such, people might be more tolerant of naturists and naturism depending on the context and situation.

3.4. Theme 4: In the Eyes of Outsiders

3.4.1. Sub-Theme 4.1: False Beliefs

Within the final theme, False Beliefs is a sub-theme that captures naturists' beliefs about their non-naturist counterparts. Participants reflected on their perceptions of non-naturists beliefs about naturism. Beliefs about naturists can vary depending on the individuals' background and previous experiences. Participants highlighted that their beliefs of the public towards those who identify as naturists are mostly negative. Individuals may associate naturism with sexual behavior due to both behaviors involving individuals being naked [24]. This might be an automatic response from the non-naturists due to the representations of naturism in the media. Furthermore, members of the public might be more inclined to stick to these false beliefs due to their lack of understanding of what naturism entails. It could also be argued that individuals are taught to believe that it is normal to be naked in the bedroom amongst one's intimate partner. Thus, these false associations might be reached automatically due to societal beliefs.

False associations have been previously explored in relation to other minority groups [96]. For instance, it is suggested that false beliefs have a significant impact on racist attitudes [97, 98]. Additionally, false beliefs are related to higher levels of negative attitudes towards minority groups or behaviors that might be considered deviant [99].

Some participants linked engaging in naturism to other behaviors which involve exposing body parts in public, such as breastfeeding. This comparison highlighted that the source of negative beliefs towards a behavior does not solely depend on the extent of exposure of body parts. Even though, the motivations behind the abovementioned behaviors drastically vary, the false beliefs surrounding them stem from the same origin, which is the societal discomfort towards exposure to body parts from a general perspective.

3.4.2. Sub-Theme 4.2: Engrained Associations

The final sub-theme focuses on the cultural and social perspectives. It explores the link between attitudes towards the behavior of naturism and the engrained associations of individuals due to the influence of their upbringing, culture, and religion. Immersion in negative cultural and religious beliefs towards specific behaviors such as naturism throughout one's life might have an impact on their beliefs towards them throughout their lifespan. Given that these associations are engrained within the person, it might be a significant challenge to change these sets of beliefs.

Nonetheless, previous research has suggested a link between attitude and familiarity with the characteristics of a minority group [100]. Given the general public does not have an in-depth understanding of naturism, this lack of familiarity might lead to more negative attitudes towards the behavior. Furthermore, it has been suggested that negative attitudes towards a behavior that might be considered deviant could be replaced with a more positive one, if individuals establish a personal connection with members of that minority group [101]. However, due to naturists' anticipation of fear and unwillingness to engage in the behavior in the public eye, it is a challenge to establish a positive personal connection with members of the outgroup. Furthermore, culture, upbringing and previous learned values have an impact on one's attitudes towards different behaviors [101]. Individuals from more violent cultural characteristics might have more accepting attitudes towards violence in comparison to others [101]. As such, due to the diversity of engrained values amongst the general public, it might be a challenge to anticipate the reactions of individuals who are faced with those who engage in naturism.

4. General Discussion

Although naturism remains an under-researched field of investigation, there are wide representations of this behavior presented in media. These representations provide an understanding of the stigma associated with the behavior. The anecdotal evidence portrays that engagement in naturism is linked to sexual connotations and the current findings partially support this assumption.

According to the voices of participants in this present study, negative beliefs towards naturism stem from the upbringing of individuals at an early age, being assumed to believe that it is an obligation to wear clothes in the presence of others. This might lead younger children to perceive that being unclothed amongst others is a threat and possibly

something to be ashamed of. Consequently, their response to individuals who engage in naturism will be engrained in their core beliefs from their childhood.

Findings from any study should, however, be considered in light of its potential limitations. It should be acknowledged that this is the first empirical research study of its kind to explore the experiences of individuals who engage in naturism and perceived stigma towards this behavior. Even though statistics suggest that the number of individuals who engage in naturism is rising rapidly, many naturists are gay white men. A limitation of the present study is that participants who were interviewed consisted of ten individuals who are White British, heterosexual and between the ages of 55 and 74 years. Experiences of naturists who are from different demographic backgrounds might vary. As such, future research should recruit a more diverse sample of naturists. Furthermore, findings from this study can be used as a platform in which to design quantitative and mixed methods studies that can explore the perceived stigma towards naturism in the general population.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers a rich appreciation of perceived stigma towards naturists and adds insight into the lived experiences of those who engage in naturism. Four key themes emerged from this study (*Naturist identity; Naturist community; Social acceptance* and *In the eyes of the outsiders*). These themes represent the lived experiences of individuals who engage in naturist activities. The discourses of participants in this study are in line with the anecdotal evidence surrounding stigma towards naturism. The media representations of naturism suggest that it has been gaining more attention by the public. Additionally, naturism has a growing presence in social media, which contributes to the shaping beliefs towards this behavior and can assist in raising awareness. However, due to several factors, including cultural and social values, individuals who are less familiar with this behavior might find it challenging to differentiate between nudity and the sexual connotations attached to the naked body. Hopefully, this research will go some way in overcoming these apparent and experienced misconceptions.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee University of Northampton.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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