(Research Article)

Exposing perceptions and beliefs towards naturism: A qualitative exploration of personal narratives

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Abstract

Some behaviours and individual characteristics can be labelled as offensive. In today's world, almost any behaviour or characteristic might be perceived as deviating from the norm by any specific observer. Naturism, which has recently gained the interest of scholars, refers to engaging in nudity without the intention of any sexual stimulation. There is vast literature which explores perceptions and beliefs towards individuals who belong to minority groups. However, there is a current gap in the literature when it comes to understanding perceptions of textiles (non-naturists) towards naturism. The present qualitative study addresses this gap by representing non-naturists' voices surrounding their beliefs towards naturism. Ten participants were recruited to collect rich and detailed data by convenience sampling method to explore their beliefs and perceptions towards naturism. Two distinct themes emerged from a reflective thematic analysis of the dataset: *Incognizant acceptance* and *Beliefs surrounding naturists.* Participant narratives suggest that individuals who are non-naturists but unfamiliar with naturism have a limited understanding of what it is. The findings of the present study assist in deepening our understanding of naturism and offer to challenge societal beliefs and values in relation to naturism.

Keywords: Naturism; Stigma; Perceptions; Beliefs; Qualitative; Reflective Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

In today's world, stigma is understood as a complex concept which influences individuals and the interaction between groups within the society [1]. Goffman [2] suggests that stigma is an attribute which is linked to undesirable stereotypes and causes individuals to be treated differently by the society. Individuals who experience stigma suffer from serious consequences such as exclusion, segregation and unfair treatment [1].

Goffman [2] suggested that stigma may be either achieved or ascribed. Achieved stigma refers to the stigma associated with people's behaviours. For instance, an individual who has been a smoker for a long time and develops lung cancer, or a homosexual individual who contracts Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) might be seen as being less worthy of receiving sympathy and/or acceptance from other members of their society [3]. Conversely, the term ascribed stigma is attributed to individuals due to the way they are [4]. That is, an individual who has epilepsy might feel stigmatised, even though they do not have a control over the behaviours associated with it [5]. Thus, stigma can either be something an individual is born with (ascribed) or something they earn later in life (achieved).

In countries such as the United States and Germany, there have been active attempts to reduce stigma towards individuals living with mental health issues in order to improve the lives of these individuals [6]. Some of these attempts include educating the public on specific topics such as mental health to reduce the stigmatising conditions. For instance, the National Alliance of the Mentally Ill, established by the family members and individuals with mental illness, who call

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themselves "stigmabusters" carry out protests against the media representations of stigma across the U.S. [6]. In Germany, many groups of individuals and organisations (i.e., BASTA) who ally for individuals suffering from mental health conditions engage in campaigns using technology (e-mailing lists) and hold extensive education programmes in schools and at government organisations such as the police departments and academies to educate the public on mental health illnesses [6]. Similarly, in Australia and New Zealand, the government leads both regional and national initiatives for individuals with mental health conditions active engagement and participation in the society.

Three main strategies have been utilised in order to tackle stigma: education, protest and contact [7]. Individuals and organisations have adopted educational programmes that aim to reduce levels of stigma by providing information contradictory to societal beliefs. Individuals being exposed to educational courses on mental health conditions has led to a reduction on stigmatising attitudes amongst different groups of individuals [police officers, 8; government employees, 9; high school students, 10]. Even though, psychoeducation has been reported as an effective way to tackle stigma surrounding mental health issues and "deviant" behaviours, the research on the impact of educational campaigns suggests that the behavioural change after participation in these programmes is not accurately measured [6]. Furthermore, educational programmes might be more effective on individuals who had previous understanding of mental health conditions or experienced a firsthand contact with an individual suffering from a mental illness previously [11].

Protest often involves the public's reaction towards stigmatising statements, reports or advertisements involving minority groups [7]. Around 80 percent of discriminating cases that BASTA took action against in Germany were successfully stopped and the media institutions publicly apologized for stigmatising advertisings and inaccurate media representations regarding individuals with mental health illnesses. Similarly, Wahl [12] suggests that protest and similar initiatives have been effective in the U.S. when it comes to reducing negative public attitudes towards mental illness. However, social psychological research suggests that engaging in protest might lead to individuals suppressing their stereotypical thoughts and discriminating behaviour. Individuals who engage in suppression might be less likely to learn new information regarding their stigmatising stereotypes [13] and over time, they might experience more stigmatising thoughts in comparison to before [14]. As such, even though protest might be considered a useful strategy to reduce stigmatising public images, it may not lead to a significant change in discriminating behaviour long term [6].

Allport [15] introduced the term contact hypothesis which proposes that acquaintance and knowledge will help to reduce prejudice. The opportunity to get to know an individual or a minority group, makes it possible to break down the stigma and prejudice (Pettigrew and Troop, 2005; Royal, 2022; Schiappa et al., 2005). When a person who has stigma towards a particular individual or group encounters a minority group member and have a positive experience with them, an attitude change will take place [15]. Firstly, the negative stereotypes associated with the group will change to a more positive perception of the individual and/or the group. Secondly, these newly developed positive perceptions towards the individual will extend to the individual's group.

According to Allport [15], there are four necessary conditions to be met for the positive experience to take place. These conditions are equal-group status within the situation, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and institutional support. Equal status refers to the fact that members of the contact situation do not have a hierarchical relationship (i.e., employer/employee) and its importance has been highlighted through research [16; 17]. Cooperation refers to individuals working together without competition (i.e., group projects). Once individuals are working together towards a common goal, it is believed that the outcomes will be more positive [18]. Common goals refer to members relying on each other to reach the desired goal or behaviour (i.e., members of a sports team). The importance of having common goals has been highlighted amongst teams with interracial group members while working together to achieve their objectives [19]. And finally, institutional support refers to institutions and authorities encouraging positive contact (i.e., not having laws which might enforce segregation). Landis and colleagues [20] have previously highlighted the importance of institutional support when it comes to reducing prejudice amongst diverse groups.

Others [21] have proposed further conditions, such as being in a voluntary participation and having intimate contact. However, in their meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp [22] have suggested that the presence of each condition laid out by Allport [15] does not necessarily have to be present to reduce the bias. Thus, mere contact is a sufficient condition to reduce the bias [23]. Even though contact hypothesis has been widely researched, a very small amount of the literature employed an experimental research design when investigating this topic [24]. In their research, Pagtolunan and Clair [25] invited a homosexual male to answer questions on homosexuality during a college class which explored "deviant" behaviour. A total number of 35 students who experienced this contact with the invited speaker reported significant reduction in homophobia when post-tested within the hour of their contact with the speaker. Additionally, it is suggested that contact hypothesis is a valid strategy when it comes to reducing prejudice towards individuals who suffer from mental and/or physical disabilities [24, 26].

Furthermore, in a longitudinal study, which aimed to examine the effects of friendships with members of one's own and other ethnic groups (i.e., White, Asian, Latino and Black) amongst undergraduate university students, Levin, and colleagues [27] found that students who reported more intergroup bias and experienced higher levels of anxiety due to engaging with individuals from different ethnic groups had fewer friends from the outgroup and more friends from their ingroup. Furthermore, their findings highlighted the importance of having previous contact/friendship with those from the outgroup [i.e., contact hypothesis; 15]. More specifically, their findings suggested that those who had more outgroup friends during university reported more positive ethnic attitudes towards outgroup members. Even though previous research on attitudes and beliefs towards outgroups versus ingroups does exist, Levin et al.'s [27] findings contribute to the support of contact hypothesis due to its longitudinal nature. In a number of interventions, contact has been combined with education [8; 28; 29], suggesting that a more positive change in attitudes can be experienced when contact is incremented with education [30].

Stigmatisation can occur at any given time, as any one individual might find the behaviour of others offensive or inappropriate [31]. As such, it is not possible to list all the grounds for stigmatisation of individuals and behaviours. Attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs towards behaviours which have been labelled as "deviant" are complex and multifaceted, and might vary dependent on different factors (law, location, religion) and situations. Overall, it is a "persistent predicament" [32; pp. 363] which can have a significant impact on individuals [33]. Falk [31] suggests that stigmatisation can occur at any given time, due to individuals' finding behaviours or characteristics of others offensive. Although some attributes and behaviours have been explored extensively (e.g., gender), some have only recently received attention (e.g., BDSM). Nevertheless, substantial research across common stigmas suggest that the consequences of the stigmas are significantly detrimental. Naturism is one commonly labelled "deviant" behaviour that has received very little attention [34]. Engaging in the behaviour of naturism is linked to offensive and inferior connotations [35]. According to Barcan [36], public nudity is considered a perverted, "deviant", and demeaning behaviour. Therefore, public perceptions and attitudes towards nudism range from suspicion, embarrassment to hostility [37].

Moreover, beliefs regarding naturism are controversial [38]. The practice of engaging in naturism at designated beaches has been a common practice [39]. Preston-Whyte [40] suggests that naturist beaches are sacred places where the normal status quo is temporarily suspended due to clothing being reduced and allowing individuals to experience freedom from the social norms. Barcan [41] reports that it is common for homosexual men to be present on naturist sites (i.e., beaches). Adding that naturist sites allow homosexual naturists an opportunity to escape social norms and provides them with the opportunity to explore their sexual identity [42]. There is literature to also support the view that naturist sites offer both heterosexuals [43] and homosexuals the opportunity to engage in exhibitionism, voyeurism, and swinging [42; 44; 45; 46]. As such, not all individuals who engage in social nudity are true to the naturist philosophy [39] and might experience stigmatisation for their engagement in behaviour that does not fit under the naturist philosophy [47].

Today, naturist organisations define naturism as engaging in social nudity in the presence of others (and public places) while putting an emphasis on the lack of intention of sexual stimulation throughout one's engagement [48; 49]. Even though, the definition of naturism amongst naturist organisations highlights the lack of intentions of sexual stimulation, Smith and King [50] have previously suggested that some individuals who choose to engage in naturism might do so in order to explore aspects of their sexuality which might be considered as taboos in a safe environment.

The existing literature on naturism is limited and outdated [34]. Given the interchangeable use of terms nudism and naturism, some scholars have explored the perceptions towards nudism in tourism [51; 52]. One distinction that is highlighted between nudism and naturism is that nudism is the simple act of not wearing clothing, therefore lacks the fundamental philosophy of naturism [51]. Naturism on the other hand came about as a social movement [53] and is considered a leisure activity which is founded on the ideology that nature provides medicinal benefits to individuals [54]. As such, some of the existing literature does not make any distinction between these concepts [51]. From a naturist perspective, the use of clothing within the society divides individuals into grades, types, and categories [i.e., normal, "deviant", civilized, insane; 51;55]. Additionally, it is suggested that social nudity is suggested to not only bring medical, political, social, and psychological benefits to those who engage in the behaviour, but also helps societies to weaken racial, class and gender divisions [41].

Individuals who identify as naturists and engage in the behaviour are predominantly older heterosexual men [57]. The gender imbalance amongst those who engage in naturism is not a unique issue in the United Kingdom, but also in many countries [58]. After the World War II, Americans were concerned that the naturist clubs in the country would be perceived as a gathering spot for homosexuals due to majority of their members being men [58]. Similar to the United States, naturist clubs and organizations in the United Kingdom are mostly made of male members. Throughout the early

years of naturism, men were encouraged to entice more females to join naturist organizations. According to the British Naturism [59], there are more males who attend naturist events and engage in the behaviour in comparison to women. A possible reason for the imbalance of genders when it comes to engaging in naturism might be due to the pressure in the modern society, which insists that women's bodies need to be at a specific standard [59].

Egger and Egger [37] suggest that non-naturists who are referred to as the "textiles" in the naturist community have a big misconception of naturisms and naturists. According to Clarke [39] this misconception partly stems from the Church considering nudity as something to be ashamed of and to feel guilty about. Barcan [36] further suggests that social nudity across societies is both considered "deviant", demeaning, criminal or transgressive and an exhilarating behaviour at the same time. As such, public attitudes towards naturists and the behaviour of naturism range amongst suspicion, embarrassment, condemnation to hostility [51], which leads to those who identify as naturists to disguise their identity and engage in secrecy to protect themselves [37].

In the mid 20th century New Zealand, the behaviour of naturism was commonly associated with sex and sexuality. The mass media rejected naturists and ridiculed those who engaged in the behaviour [56]. Similar stories of naturists have been previously shared in newspapers or social media. For instance, a recent interview with a naturist who has been engaging in the behaviour for 45 years has been shared on mirror.co.uk. The interviewee reports that he has previously been accused of being part of "*a cult of raving sex freaks*" [60]. In a 2012 newspaper article, a head of department at a high school in the United Kingdom was reported as being suspended from his job in February due to having their picture taken while skinny-dipping [60]. The council defended their decision on the case by stating that they received numerous complaints from parents regarding the picture that was shared online. Another published article in May of 2012 reported that the teacher was allowed to return to work after a thorough internal investigation by the workplace and the council [60]. The comment sections of both articles highlight that readers do not see anything wrong with the behaviour of naturism. For instance, a reader stated: "*This is absolutely ridiculous, what a poor man! Having his name dragged through the papers, it's not as if he was sending the picture to his pupils now, was it?! This is a step to far and this man may never live this down, hope you feel proud of yourselves.*" News articles similar to these do highlight the fact that there are still negative beliefs about naturists and those who engage in the behaviour have to bear the consequences of their naturist identity in their professional lives.

Finally, excerpts from social media accounts highlight that there are negative perceptions towards naturists and naturism. In addition, even though engaging in naturism is not against the law in many countries, naturists might experience severe consequences for their naturist identity in the society and the workplace. As such, having a more holistic understanding of perceptions and beliefs towards naturists and this behaviour might help investigate the extent of stigma associated with the behaviour.

Aims of the current study

There is currently a shortage of academic literature on naturism and the perceptions surrounding the behaviour. Naturism has been a controversial topic, due to the behaviour involving being present amongst other individuals in the nude. Furthermore, a review of the literature has identified an existing gap regarding identifying and understanding the beliefs towards naturists and the behaviour itself. Overall, the present study aimed to gain a rich and in-depth understanding of the perceptions and beliefs surrounding naturism. The overarching research question was: *What are the perceptions surrounding the behaviour of naturism and to what extent do non-naturists hold personal stigma towards the behaviour?* The key objective of this research study was to contribute to the broader understanding of the behaviour of naturism by exploring the beliefs surrounding the behaviour.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

The present study adopted a qualitative design. Qualitative methods are commonly used in the existing literature when it comes to exploring beliefs and attitudes [61]. More specifically, the present research adhered to the Big Q qualitative research [62]. Big Q research adheres to an inductive approach with the aim to limit the researcher's values onto experiences and opinions shared by the participants [63]. As such, in order to meet the aims of the present study of exploring the perceptions and beliefs, the Big Q research paradigm was appropriate.

2.2. Participants

Ten adults were recruited for the present study. Participants were provided with pseudonyms to protect their identity and all identifying personal details were removed during the transcription process. No further participants were recruited due to reaching data saturation after analysing the collected data. As such, further sampling would not add to the richness of the collected data.

2.3. Data Collection and ethical safeguards

Data collection process began as soon as obtaining ethical approval from the university research ethics committee. A participant recruitment flyer was shared on social media and with personal contacts. Potential participants who met the inclusion criteria were invited to get in touch with the principal researcher. After a pre-screening process, potential participants were sent the participant facing documents (i.e., participant information sheet and informed consent form). After receiving the signed consent forms, a mutually convenient time was agreed upon to conduct the online semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. In order to facilitate the transcription process and avoid data loss, all interviews were audio-recorded. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the interview schedule was applied loosely, and participants were encouraged to further elaborate on their answers with use of prompts.

2.4. Data Analysis

Several factors were considered when designing this qualitative research study. The epistemological position has been taken into consideration due to the fact that the philosophical principles that underpin the research will have an influence on the qualitative approach that has been chosen [64; 65]. Additionally, the chosen qualitative method should complement the research questions. Furthermore, another factor which might influence the decision might involve the researcher's interests in a specific qualitative method [66].

According to Braun and Clarke [62], Thematic Analysis (TA) is a useful method which helps identify, analyse, and report themes within datasets. Furthermore, it helps generate themes which explain and help gain an insight to the phenomena [66]. TA is one of the many approaches in qualitative research consistent with the Big Q research paradigm. It is possible to use TA to have a rich but in-depth understanding of a dataset or explore the richness of 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 [62].

From an analytical perspective, TA is not affiliated with any specific ontological or epistemological positions [62]. According to Braun and Clarke [62], TA provides the opportunity to gain a rich and detailed account of a dataset, and it is a philosophically flexible approach to analysis. TA can be conducted from an inductive or a deductive perspective [62]. This means that the emergence of themes in the dataset can develop inductively where the themes have emerged from the raw data or deductively in which the researcher refers to theoretical concepts linked to the research [67]. This study used an inductive approach to data analysis and did not attempt to fit with the pre-existing ideas and assumptions of the researcher [62]. As such, the themes were rooted in the words of the participants to clearly represent the participants' speech.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was adopted for its flexible approach [68]. Additionally, RTA highlights the importance of the interpretation and the active role of the researcher during the analytic process [62]. The analytic approach in RTA is not seen as a linear process of moving across steps. Rather so, it is suggested that the researcher should move back and forth between the six-step analytic approach in order to strengthen the interpretations of the dataset [68]. During the analytic process, the data were familiarised with prior to generating the initial codes and searching for emergent themes. Throughout the process of familiarisation, potential themes were refined. Themes that were not supported by enough data were disregarded. Finally, data extracts were reviewed to define the themes.

It has been acknowledged that qualitative research has been criticized by scholars who use quantitative measures due to sample size, reliability of measures and replicable outcomes [69]. Yardley [69] highlights the difficulty in assessing the quality and validity within the qualitative research paradigm, due to the diverse range of epistemological positions and methodologies available. The validity indicators of quantitative research which are generally accepted by researchers cannot be applied due to the philosophical underpinnings and commitments of qualitative research, which rejects positivism and challenges the notion of creating objective knowledge. According to Yardley [69], there are four criteria that help assess the quality of validity within qualitative research, which should be used in a flexible approach rather than a prescriptive one. The four key dimensions are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence

and transparency, and impact and importance [69]. These four key dimensions were adhered to when assessing the quality and validity of the present study.

3. Results and Discussion

The core aim of the present study was to gain insight into the perceptions and beliefs surrounding naturism. This aim was met by collecting detailed data from a sample of non-naturists. As shown in Table 1., two central themes emerged, following a reflexive thematic analysis of data that was collected through online semi-structured interviews. The two key themes were: *Incognizant acceptance* and *Beliefs surrounding naturism.*

Table 1 Emergent Themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quote
Incognizant acceptance	Unfamiliarity	*"I mean, honestly, I have never sat down and thought about naturism. It is not something we think about on a daily basis to be honest."*
	Attempts to justify naturism	*"It might be potentially very liberating perhaps; this is why they do it."*
Beliefs surrounding naturism	Harmless individuals	*"When I think of a naturist, I think they are really pure and I think that they have a good heart…but most of them are probably really good in nature and they probably don't need anything extra to define themselves other than their bodies, so I appreciate what they do, I appreciate their courage."*
	Engrained associations	*"You know, I would say they are comfortable in their skin, and they must be even, you know they do not give any f**** what anyone thinks about them, I think."*

3.1. Theme 1: Incognizant acceptance

3.1.1. Sub-Theme 1.1: Unfamiliarity

Throughout the interviews, a common theme that emerged from the data was the lack of familiarity of the participants with naturism. Participants highlighted their incognizance towards naturism, which evokes feelings of curiosity towards the behaviour. Naturism is not talked about in breadth and depth by the public. This might stem from the fact that it is not common to see individuals engaging in naturism due to naturists' fear of perceived stigmatisation. The term familiarity is a complex construct, which is defined as having the knowledge of or experience with a phenomenon [70].

The current findings suggest that participants do not have an in-depth familiarity with naturism. The lack of exposure to individuals who identify as naturists might be considered a significant factor in being comfortable amongst individuals who practice the behaviour. This exposure to naturism would undoubtedly contribute to a non-naturist understanding of it and raise awareness. Additionally, the behaviour being engaged in out of sight, might encourage outsiders to hold negative attitudes towards it. Depending on an individual's core values and previous experiences, there might be curiosity surrounding naturism which highlights an intention to engage with naturists in order to further their understanding of it.

Participants also highlighted that previously being in contact with those who engage in naturism had shifted their perceptions towards individuals who identify as naturists. Contact hypothesis has extensively been researched in relation to reducing stigma [7; 15; 71; 72]. In a positive contact situation, individuals come to realise that their stereotypes are not consistent with the stigmatised group [73]. Thus, their contact with members of the stigmatised group results in improved beliefs and attitudes, which then generalizes to other members of the stigmatised group [71]. Previous research [74; 75; 76; 77] has extensively investigated contact both involving a direct contact (having a family member, a neighbour, a friend) and an indirect contact (watching a video of a person). According to existing literature, those who have previous contact with individuals diagnosed with a mental illness hold more positive attitudes and beliefs towards them [76] and are more willing to provide them with professional opportunities [77]. As a consequence, by strengthening the intergroup contact between naturists and non-naturists, the awareness surrounding the behaviour of naturism could be improved. These types of interactions might lead to a reduction in contributing to the negative societal understanding of the behaviour.

3.1.2. Sub-Theme 1.2: Attempts to justify naturism

The second sub-theme captured the essence of participants' beliefs in terms of their naturist counterparts. Participants' narratives represented their attempts to justify engaging in naturism and highlighted their sense-making process of the behaviour. Participants reflected on motivations that might encourage individuals to engage in naturism. Despite a lack of awareness on the topic, participants elaborated on their positive views surrounding the behaviour. These positive remarks represent open-mindedness and desire to make sense of the behaviour. Their voices and perceptions when elaborating on reasons why individuals might engage in the behaviour are interesting given the fact that they lack an in-depth knowledge of the behaviour.

One common narrative amongst participants was their perception of naturism as representing courage due to exposing oneself to others in their most natural and vulnerable state: unclothed. Individuals commonly show off their social status by the clothes and other visible accessories (jewelry) they use. However, amongst naturists, there is no difference in social status, as there are no visible indicators of social class. Given the fact that, engaging in naturist activities requires an individual to present themselves as a person without hiding under clothes and the general beauty standards of the society, whereby engaging in naturism may be considered an act of bravery. Interestingly, one participant stated that individuals might engage in naturism due to seeking attention from other members of the public. Despite this not being a strong representation of stigma, it can still be considered a stigmatising view.

Nowadays, individuals may come across naturist beaches in many Western countries. Participants provided further elaboration on the frequency of running into naturists especially in Europe and highlighted engaging in the behaviour at a naturist beach represents that the individual is free, and they are focusing on the present moment. This highlights that engaging in naturist activities may be seen as an attempt to clear minds and distance the self from stress, and daily struggles of normal life. In today's world, individuals try anything and everything within their reach such as yoga, meditation, breathwork in order to experience being in the present, calming down and avoiding stress. It might be possible to consider engaging in naturist activities as a means of finding inner peace, destressing, and grounding oneself.

Given that members of society are conditioned to follow the socially accepted values, such as being naked amongst others being considered a taboo, practice in naturist activities might be an attempt to normalize nudity and challenge the norms within a society. Participants' discourses highlighted that even though they are unable to understand the point in engaging in naturist activities, they can see that it might be an attempt to normalize nudity within the society. Engaging in naturist activities might be related to a protest. For instance, the World Naked Bike Ride which takes place in many different cities across the world is known as a protest for fossil and fuel consumption in addition to its aim to promote body positivity and draw attention to cyclists' safety. As such, individuals who engage in naturist activities might be practicing self-acceptance and doing their part in promoting body positivity within the society.

3.2. Theme 2: Beliefs surrounding naturists

3.2.1. Sub-Theme 2.1: Harmless individuals

Participants elaborated on their perceptions and beliefs towards individuals who engage in naturism. Even though, there are negative labels attached to naturism on social media, participants expressed that individuals who engage in naturism are harmless. These representations of participants' beliefs may be impacted by their personal core values and previously lived experiences. Interestingly, participants reported having lived abroad for a period of time throughout their adulthood. This exposure to individuals from different backgrounds might have an impact on their views and perceptions towards naturists.

Many participants, who had no prior contact with naturists reflected and shared that they [*naturists*] could possibly be the least dangerous group of people on the planet. This positive label towards naturists might stem from the fact that naturists tend not to impose their beliefs towards those who have opposing views towards naturism. Additionally, participants' narratives regarding the naivety of individuals who engage in naturism might be linked to their thoughtfulness and consideration towards others amongst them by respecting non-naturists and putting their needs first. Alternatively, this could be an accurate representation of naturists adjusting their behaviour as a group to avoid any kind of conflict with their non-naturist counterparts, highlighting their fear of stigmatization [34, 38].

A male participant struggled at first when elaborating on his beliefs regarding naturism. His narrative started by highlighting that he would feel uncomfortable for their mother, as a female, being around a naturist, especially if they were a male. However, during the interview process, he paused and reflected on his own words to then confess that he was struggling to find the link between feeling unsafe and being around naturists. The narrative of the participants highlighted that they believe naturists are harmless individuals who might be suffering from societal stigma due to

unrelated reasons. These discourses also highlight that individuals may not necessarily have negative beliefs towards naturists, though they may have initial thoughts that are not necessarily thought through with enough reflection. As such, the initial response towards the behaviour might be subconscious, automatic, and irrational.

3.2.2. Sub-Theme 2.2: Engrained associations

One's belief system and core values are highly influenced by the environment. In addition to taught values, cultural norms and religious beliefs play an important part when it comes to shaping attitudes and beliefs towards others in adulthood. Participants who identified as non-naturists who took part in the interviews come from different nationalities. As such, their reflections on the importance of engrained associations towards the behaviour of naturism are invaluable to gaining an understanding of the link between them. Participants highlighted the impact of culture, religion, and impact of their surroundings in relation to naturism. Regardless of the differences in culture, religion and lived experiences, it was interesting to see the commonalities amongst their elaborations.

Participants talked of culture as an important element when it comes to influencing individuals' perceptions towards a behaviour. Stigma is a universal phenomenon, and it is considered as an existential experience amongst cultures [78]. Additionally, the meaning and the consequences of stigma might differ across cultures [79]. Participants reflected on her cultural values and highlighted the importance of the impact culture might have on an individual's perceptions towards others in life. One of the participants who was born and raised in a Muslim country struggled to accept that engaging in naturism in public is acceptable, even though she shared that she had no negative beliefs surrounding it. More specifically, according to her, the context and situation behind engaging in naturism is an important factor to consider.

Growing up in a more conservative culture, might lead individuals to maintain a more conservative opinion regarding specific behaviours like naturism. For instance, a participant recalled that growing up, her parents went above and beyond to make sure that she was not exposed to their naked bodies. Her reflection might suggest that, due to cultural traditions and societal norms, a child witnessing their parents' body in the nude is something to be frowned upon. Thus, these engrained memories and associations have an influence on her perceptions of what should be considered normal and acceptable.

Additionally, another participant, who also grew up in a similar fashion and values, believed that nudity is closely linked to sexual behaviour. It is evident that in his reality, the only times he was exposed to a naked body was when he engaged in sexual relationships. These kinds of experiences highlight the taught ideology of individuals relating nudity to sexuality in an explicit manner. As such, changing these core beliefs that stem from one's childhood, upbringing and previous experiences might be more challenging. One participant shared that their perceptions towards life in general and other groups of individuals have drastically changed after leaving a conservative home, and a family who was religious. The participant went on to share that, he embraced his sexual orientation by coming out as a homosexual man to his family. This suggests their perceptions towards naturists might be more favourable. This is possibly due to belonging to a minority group and sharing similar experiences to naturists in life. Additionally, leaving their environment and experiencing what life is like outside the bubble he knew throughout his life, the exposure to individuals from different paths of life might contribute to this shift in his beliefs towards naturism.

Even though participants nationalities, cultural backgrounds, ages and sexual orientations varied, their narratives jointly emphasise the importance of engrained associations which have an impact on beliefs towards naturism. These testimonials describe how engrained associations are closely intertwined with one's perception towards naturism that might be considered deviant by the general public.

3.2.3. Sub-Theme 2.3: Being comfortable in their skin

This final sub-theme sits within the wider theme of beliefs surrounding naturism and captures a positive belief towards members of the naturist community. More specifically, it highlighted the participants' beliefs regarding naturists' self-acceptance regarding their body image. Participants elaborated on positive body image perceptions naturists might experience due to their engagement in the behaviour. Interestingly, some participants' reflections led to making a comparison of their own body images in relation to engaging in naturism. Body image has been thoroughly explored by scholars and is currently one of the biggest concerns for young people and adults.

Experiencing body image issues can have a significant impact on overall life satisfaction [80]. Due to engaging in naturism involving being in the company of naked individuals who typically do not have idealised bodies [81] without any intimate contact, this exposure might lead to higher satisfaction levels regarding an individual's own body.

One participant talked of his struggles with body image issues, and considers himself to be overweight, reflected that when he was in a better shape, he used to take part in photoshoots which involved posing in his underwear. However, his insecurity regarding his weight leads him to highlight that he would not feel comfortable being naked amongst other individuals. This comparison Nicholas made between himself and naturists, led to him emphasizing the fact that individuals who engage in naturism are comfortable in their own skin. The participants further reflected and highlighted that those who engage in naturism do not have any concerns regarding other individuals' opinion on their body, due to their own positive perception of their body image. Similarly, another participant reflected on attempts that females make in order to meet the societal beauty standards. Her link between naturism and the acceptable beauty standards regarding females in the wider society reiterates that by choosing to engage in the behaviour, individuals experience higher levels of self-acceptance towards their bodies. As such, simply by choosing to engage in naturism, an individual might challenge the societal ideas surrounding naked bodies and develop more confidence in their body image. Possibly, the discussion around naturists having more positive perceptions towards their body image could be reframed. The fact that those who engage in naturism are exposed to bodies that do not align with the social beauty standards might contribute to an improvement on their perceptions towards self and body images. Fiona elaborated that due to naturism taking place strictly without any presence of sexual stimulation, individuals might find it easier to detach from social norms and accept their physical differences.

The discourse of the participants emphasises the link between individuals who choose to engage in naturism and their perceptions of self-image. Additionally, participants' reports of a positive aspect of individuals who engage in naturism reflects their lack of explicit personal stigma towards the behaviour.

4. General Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This qualitative study collected in-depth data regarding the beliefs surrounding the behaviour of naturism. The voices and the narratives of the participants led to an in-depth understanding of their beliefs towards the behaviour. For instance, the interviewees' unfamiliarity with the behaviour and their attempts to justify engagement in naturism from a positive perspective highlighted their low levels of personal stigma towards the behaviour.

Interestingly, engrained associations theme also emerged in the narratives of non-naturists, confirming how sociocultural and religious factors might contribute to the perceptions towards the behaviour. Non-naturist participants further shared their beliefs regarding individuals who choose to engage in naturism by elaborating on the higher levels of body image perception amongst naturists.

In conclusion, the present study contributes to the literature on naturism by capturing the essence of beliefs surrounding the behaviour from a non-naturist sample. Two key themes emerged from this study (*Incognizant acceptance* and *Beliefs surrounding naturists*). These themes represent the perceptions and beliefs towards naturism. The findings of this study somewhat contradict the anecdotal evidence surrounding the beliefs towards naturism. Naturism could be considered a taboo area that discourages individuals to openly talk about the behaviour. Due to the controversial opinions on naturism, it is important to understand and gain a deeper insight regarding beliefs surrounding it. As such, this empirical exploration of perceptions and beliefs towards naturism will hopefully pave the way to challenging societal perceptions on the topic and lead to further exploration of the topic, which might eventually normalize the behaviour.

Compliance with ethical standards

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