Ashamed Bodies: The Struggle into Changing Body Ideals

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Abstract

Women’s body shape and weight is a topic of everyday conversation in Saudi Arabia. A generation ago it was not. Daily newspaper cartoons satirise women’s battle with weight and show a rapid and significant shift of how a woman’s body in the Saudi society should be now: a thin and fit body. In the past, larger, usually married women were a common sight receiving little commentary from popular culture and from people’s everyday conventions. Gym work and exercise were seen as inappropriate for women, and there were no diet foods or clinics. There has been a substantial change and increase with women-only gyms and special diet clinics, diet foods and a change to view the thin and fit body as the contemporary ideal. Using a conceptual combination of work by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, this thesis explores the socio-cultural factors influencing women’s application of weight management practices in Saudi Arabian context.

The thesis examines this change from 6 mother-daughter cases, describing the socio-cultural factors that influence women’s use of different disciplining-body-technologies and documenting the experiences and changing subjectivities of Saudi women. One-to-one interviews, participant-diaries, and researcher-observation at women-only-family gatherings, form this mixed-qualitative approach. Ideas and ideals, norms and stigma about body size and shape across generations and within families are reported. I bring empirical focus to the interconnections between the social and individual body, how body work is both inherited within families and shaped by the forms of symbolic power valued at different times, body docility as obedient and productive, and family-body habitus as it relates to body-disciplinary-technology practices. I signal the everyday experiences/expressions of a contemporary social life expressed by participants and which also makes visible those influences that structure individual experience but which individuals might be little aware of – yet can be evidenced in their narratives.

This thesis contributes to the establishment of an understanding towards the complex dynamics of social and cultural factors in forming and reforming women’s feminine subjectivities; and the way they participate in weight management practices in the Saudi Arabian context.
Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to:

The person who I know will pray for me more than I do for myself; my Mother... Hala Al-Sarhan.

The source of encouraging and understanding, the person whose words of wisdom I will always remember; my Father... Ragheb Alqutub.

My source of power and optimum happiness, my children who were taken from me back to Saudi two years ago; they are patient... Fawzi, Abdulmalik, and Talia.

The source of endless support and motivation; my family, especially my sisters, Mai, Huda, Raghdah, and Bayan, and my brothers Abdullah and Abdulrahman.

My grandmother Huda who showed her true love and deep belief in me and who kept praying for me all the time.

To all those who believed in me and secretly prayed for me.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Figure 1 Map of Chapter 1

- The women in Yellow Dresses.
- Saudi Arabian cultural background and family settings.
- Marriage: male and female relationship.
- Women’s exercise and culture.
- What about women’s bodies?
- Thesis overview.
1.1 The Women in Yellow Dresses

I got you these jeans as present and I'm sure they will look nice on you ...!!

It is not for fitness, it is for walking the maximum possible time in the shopping mall...

You want to buy sneakers ... Perfect, this is the first step towards fitness...

All that in the month of fasting???

I ordered these nice jeans from the US for my skinny, slim and fit wife ... I'm sure it's the perfect size...

و هذا الجنز هدية من أمريكا لفرائلي وفراشتي زوجتي .. وأكبر مقاسة مزوريووووط ...

أخذت لك هذا الجنز هدية وتأكد أنه بكون حلو عليك ..!!
‘He and She’ are two popular cartoon characters by Abdulrahman Alzahrani in a famous daily Saudi newspaper, Al-Watan, where they have been published for many years. These particular characters attracted the attention of Giladi (2013) who used them to analyse aspects of conservative Saudi culture that he found hard to access. He finds that “the topic of gender and women’s status in Saudi Arabia is complex and fascinating, and poses a difficult task for researchers. Saudi society, being a traditional, conservative and closed society, does not enable easy access to those seeking to reveal its secret” (Giladi, 2013: 1). Therefore, Giladi (2013) analysed Saudi society through these cartoons. ‘He and She’ reflect nuances of daily social, political and economic life of Saudi Arabians.

There are numerous examples of similar materials that depict women as ‘fat’ and ‘ugly’ (see the figure below). Women’s body, appearance, and especially their fatness or slimness, as we will see later on, is a vital topic in Saudi society. It seems that both men and women are concerned about women’s bodies and related issues. Giladi (2013) finds that the popular ‘He and She’ characters reflect Saudi middle class couples and reveal aspects of the social life in Saudi Arabia. Reading the cartoons above, the husband’s comment to his wife tacitly emphasises his dissatisfaction with her appearance and can be seen as an example of symbolic power. Symbolic power is considered in this thesis in an exploration of diet clubs and gym activities undertaken by women. Mentioning these cartoons is important to show the significance of women’s body weight and appearance as a phenomenon within Saudi society, which is the research scope.

The following table shows some cartoons depicting Saudi women that are presented in everyday newspapers.
1.2 Saudi Arabian cultural background and family settings

This thesis is applied within the context of Saudi Arabia, and, therefore, I shall give an overview about its culture and social norms. This is important to ground the reader who is less familiar with Saudi Arabian culture and social norms. Further, reviewing cultural context is vital because the theoretical approach of my work here considers culture and social norms. Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country which has its own unique culture, formed mainly by the Islamic religion. The historical reason for this is that Islam as a religion began in Makkah which is located in Saudi Arabia (Pharaon, 2004). Moreover, Saudi Arabia has acquired its sacredness among Muslims as it is home to major Islamic holy places such as Makkah and Madinah (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Makkah is the holiest Islamic place – Muslims all over the world pray five times a day facing Makkah; and it is the destination of their pilgrimage which completes the last pillar of Islam. Madinah holds the Prophet’s mosque and grave.
Islamic law (Sharia law) is the applied rule in the country, and influenced by the country’s rules, Saudis “form a closed, extremely conservative society” (Long, 2005: 17). Hence, it is a gender segregated society. This means: gender segregated education, banking, labour market, jobs, and public transportation (Al-Munajjed, 1997; Baki, 2004). Al-Munajjed (1997) argues that because of this obvious gender segregation in Saudi Arabia, there is a sense that the society is divided into two worlds, private and public. Women are associated with the private sphere whereas men are linked with the public sphere.

In public milieus – for example, shopping malls, restaurants, hospitals, streets – women are required to cover their body by wearing an *abaya* (an ankle-length black robe) and their head with a *hijab* (head scarf) due to the presence of men who are not related to them (Le Renard et al., 2008). Wearing an *abaya*, which covers the body, and a veil, which covers the head and face, in these public spheres, means that women are obliged to cover their clothing. As an illustration of how women represent themselves in the public sphere, Al-Munajjed states: “millions of women in Saudi Arabia still wear the veil. … veil plays a major role in relations between men and women … [It] functions as a protective shield from the eyes of males outside the circle of her kinsmen … (brother, son, father, uncle, grandfather)” (Al-Munajjed, 1997: 47). The figure below illustrates Saudi women wearing *abaya*, *hijab*, and veil in the public sphere.

![Figure 4 Example of gender segregation in restaurants](Gorney, 2016)
In contrast, in the private sphere, women are free to wear whatever they like without the *abaya* where only women are present, such as weddings (that is, a women-only party, as men have another, men-only, wedding party) female family gatherings, or other indoor occasions (Tawfiq and Ogle, 2013), or in the presence of next of kin males (brothers, father and uncles) (Le Renard et al., 2008). In those private settings, women are allowed to wear less modest clothing, or those garments that could be recognised more as Western clothing.

Jiang et al. (2017) affirm that Saudi Arabia is one of the most collectivist societies in the world, where family relationships are strong. In that sense, family and extended family are the most important social units that constitute the society as a whole (Long, 2005). Here, I shall review the components of the typical Saudi family and what is considered to be the nuclear or extended family. The nuclear family consists of the mother, father, daughters, sons, in-laws (daughters’ husbands and sons’ wives), and grandchildren. The extended family consists of many nuclear families of relatives. This is different from the description of nuclear and extended family in a northern European (for example, the UK) or North American context (Bengtson, 2001). Long (2005) highlights the significance of the extended family as a social unit within Saudi society:

> The extended family is the single most important structural unit of society in Saudi Arabia; virtually all Saudis consider themselves members of an extended family (Long, 2005: 35).
The gatherings of these two types of families are therefore similar but vary with regard to the formality of clothing. Female extended family gatherings are more formal than female nuclear family gatherings. For example, women would wear casual clothing, with less 'showing off' in the nuclear family gathering. However, women are more concerned with their appearance and clothing in extended family gatherings. Given that gender segregation and family are important social lines and ties, it is important to look at the female family gatherings which occur regularly, unlike weddings that are less frequent gatherings. This will give the reader an understanding of what constitutes women’s society in the Saudi context; that is, female nuclear family gatherings, and female extended family gatherings.

Weekly female family gatherings are one of the most important in the private sphere. It is a social and traditional gathering for females from the same nuclear and extended family. Every weekend, women gather in one home, usually the grandmother’s home or the older sister’s home or otherwise as they agree. For married women this is a double task. They are usually expected to attend two female gatherings, one of their own family (with their mothers and sisters) and another with their in-law family (their mother-in-law and associated female kin). A married woman has different positions in these two gatherings. In her family gathering, she is more relaxed as she grew up in this family and is used to all family members. On the in-laws occasion, a married woman feels more as an outsider, and as a result, more evaluation is felt. Therefore, a significant proportion of a married woman’s week is spent in female family gatherings.

Women’s bodies are a focal point in these gatherings as will be shown in the analysis chapters 4 and 5. In particular, women’s body shape and the clothing that is worn are on show, and are often the topic of conversation. Moreover, women have different types of chats and conversations about their lives, husbands, work, children, and so on. Interestingly, food and hospitality are also fundamental points that create tension between women. These gatherings start in the evenings – around 5 or 6 pm – and usually end at around midnight. Meanwhile, it is part of the culture to serve various types of snacks, such as pizza, pasties, nuts, desserts, coffee, tea and dates. Most of the food served contains high calories. Later on, dinner is served at around 10 or 11 pm. It usually consists of heavy food, such as rice with meat, stews, pasta, or other traditional food. The cartoon below demonstrates the increase in the amount of served snacks during the early evening in past and present years.
Thus, female family gatherings have a special importance, acting as an arena where women can express and represent themselves. It is only indoors and within their family, or with other women, that they fully present themselves in regular clothing. These gatherings are the most common occasions where they will ‘show off’ their bodies, clothing and appearance. Women then try to appear at their best because they are exposed to wider surveillance and judgement (Le Renard, 2014). Women are concerned about these gatherings as they are the place where their appearance and body will be judged. Female family gatherings, such as weddings, are milieus where women can practise their gaze and show off their “beauty … gold … dresses” (Al-Munajjed, 1997: 34). Le Renard adds that within the women-only community, women tend to stage themselves so “that they appeared to be on a runway, or even part of parade … it is not for men; it is done more frequently among women” (Le Renard, 2014: 110, emphasis in original).

Figure 6 comparing past and present cartoons

Figure 7 Saudi women in the domestic sphere (DSI, 2015)
1.3 **Marriage: male and female relationships**

Marriage is highly sacred in Saudi society as it is the ideal status for all members of society. For women, marriage and motherhood is a ‘prestige’ status that all Saudi women aim for due to cultural demands of achieving this status (Altorki, 1994). In that sense, women at a certain age are highly pressured to get married and have children, no matter their level of education or success in their career. Hence, getting married and having children is the first priority in women’s lives.

Despite the importance of marriage, the relationship between husband and wife is not equal, as Saudi society is “patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal, endogamous and occasionally polygamous” (Long, 2005: 35). According to Islamic rules, men are legally allowed to marry up to four wives, though most of the women are not happy with this. Along with other privileges men have and women do not (i.e. driving cars, freedom to travel), male gender domination is very obvious and powerful, which leads to the society’s classification as patriarchal. Men have more power, rights, and space to control, while women are encumbered by “strict rules that affect their lives” (Al-Rasheed, 2013: 1) even in mundane issues such as mobility, going shopping or visiting friends. Moreover, a woman has have to have a male guardian’s (called *mahram*) approval to proceed even with issues related just to herself – for example, applying for a job or studies or getting an ID or passport, or when travelling (Le Renard, 2014). Male guardians can be: her father, brother, uncle or husband. For a married woman, her husband is her guardian. For girls and unmarried women, the father is the guardian or, in case of a father’s death, the brother (Le Renard, 2014). If the woman does not have a brother, then her uncle from her father’s side will be her guardian. Again, if she does not have an uncle from her father’s side, then her uncle from her mother’s side is her guardian.

1.4 **Women’s exercise and culture**

In Saudi Arabia the issue of women and sport is problematic. It has always been controversial in terms of banning sport in girls’ schools and within the wider society. There are no sports that women can participate in, in addition to the banning of ‘sport education’ across all levels of education. Al-Eisa and Al-Sobayel (2012) confirm that lifestyle and political limitation have constrained women’s physical activity and thus increased the percentage of physical inactivity among women. Likewise Al-Otaibi et al. (2013) confirm that the high percentage of physical inactivity among Saudi women is due
to lifestyle and lack of spaces where women are allowed to practise physical activities. The lifestyle constrains women’s mobility in public places, in addition to the hot climate that restricts individuals’ outdoors activities in general. Notably, women’s gyms are banned, unless they are located in a department of a hospital or a health institution. Therefore, female gyms that are available are limited and classified as hospital departments, and have a high priced membership: around £1000 for annual gym membership, equivalent to a monthly salary for low-income families. That means that this would be a substantial investment of a family’s disposable income, and that women who are not affluent enough are simply excluded. Furthermore, as women are not allowed to drive, this adds more obstacles for them if they decide to join the gym (Al-Eisa and Al-Sobayel, 2012). In short, women encounter many social, cultural, economic, and political constraints that limit their physical activity and exercising.

1.5 What about women’s bodies?

The Western preoccupation with the appearance and physical body has spread globally (Askegaard et al., 2002) This modernisation and Westernisation that has been adopted by Saudi society has played a role in shifting women’s beauty ideals (Le Renard, 2014). The increasing social pressure on women to achieve the contemporary beauty ideal is soaring and has become a social phenomenon. Browsing everyday newspaper, articles, commercial advertisements and even clinical advertisements, we can see the increasing significance that is given to women’s bodies, and, in particular, a change to focus on body shape, with slim bodies being morally superior. This stands in contrast to earlier times where women’s body shape received less commentary, and weight was considered desirable and a sign of status and affluence.

All these elements demand of women to have a slimmer, healthier and better body, by taking care of themselves in order to enhance their beauty. Nevertheless, women’s body size and shape was not an issue in Saudi society thirty years ago. This issue has been ‘focused on’ by society in recent years. Le Renard (2014) argues that due to cultural and social shifts and the high pressure to conform to feminine beauty ideals “women seek to transform their bodies by means of diets, sports, aesthetic techniques … even cosmetic surgery” (Le Renard, 2014: 135). Taking care of the self, managing the body and seeking beauty ideals – especially slimness – is a vigorous contemporary phenomenon. Women participate in various activities and practices to manage their
bodies. To control their bodies, they get involved in different weight control management experiences, such as dieting, joining diet centres and gyms, or following up with dietitians. Based on the high demand for weight and body control, the number of weight control products and services has enormously increased (KenResearch, 2016; Joshi, 2014). There is a huge increase in numbers of diet centres, dietitian clinics, diet food sections in supermarkets, healthy food bars and weight control products and services. Further, more adverts have appeared in women’s magazines, daily newspapers and social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram, for weight loss products and services. Interestingly, a new, virtual method of weight loss service has been created by dietitians on the phone application WhatsApp. The dietitian creates a group of thirty women in that application and gives them instructions for their diet. They keep being contacted during the week and provide the dietitian with their weekly weight loss in order to update their diet. In this thesis I set out to explore this Saudi Arabian phenomenon and the large shift that has occurred in a generation. This research aims to investigate the following questions:

*RQ1*: What are the socio-cultural factors that influence Saudi Arabian women’s weight management practices? And how do they affect their choice of these practices?

*RQ2*: What are Saudi Arabian women’s experiences, motivations, expectations and understanding of weight management practices?

This research will investigate the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the way women see and evaluate themselves and thus participate in weight control practices, and how they define and justify these experiences. Further, it aims to reveal women’s motivations and expectations that are embedded in their weight control practices.

As discussed above, Saudi Arabia is a collectivist society, where the family and extended family are the most important social units. In addition, it is a gender-segregated society where men and women live into two different worlds (Long, 2005). These social factors put an emphasis on specifically investigating the women’s world. To access the women’s world, I have recruited mother and daughter dyads who will enable a detailed description and reflection of the social nuances about bodily practices in Saudi culture. This will be explored by mother and daughter narrations about themselves and their narrations about each other’s. One aim of my research is to investigate cultural changes in feminine beauty ideals and the appreciation of slimness through the mothers’ eyes,
who are easily marginalised or forgotten in an analysis of contemporary body ideals because the social and media attention is on their daughters. Given that mothers socialise with their daughters, it seems a neglect to not understand the mother-daughter relations with respect to body ideals and how mother-daughter dyads negotiate and manage the change in body ideals that has occurred. Saudi mothers have lived through two versions of what constitutes body ideals in Saudi society and have witnessed the rapid cultural change that has taken place in the last thirty years. They will also show if and how they have adopted these modern ideals and altered their behaviour accordingly. In addition, the daughters will reflect the contemporary feminine ideals among the current youth generation but also will have listened to stories their mothers told them as young girls, and be witness to the body shape and practices of their mothers when they were girls.

Six families, totalling twelve individuals, participated in this research. A qualitative methodology has been applied and comprises of the following qualitative methods that encompass: qualitative interviews, written diaries, and participant observation. Further details on the methods, research design and the theoretical grounding of the subject phenomena and research tools are shared with the reader in the thesis chapters. A short summary of the content of each chapter is given below for helpful preliminary navigation of this thesis content.

1.6 Thesis overview

This thesis is divided into six chapters. In Chapter 2 I review existing literature in the field. The first section explores the ‘social body’ and how it becomes a metaphor for the culture. In addition, it sets out the significance of the body in consumer culture. It reviews women’s bodies and feminine ideals within contemporary society. Further, it highlights the issue of women’s body image and the role of the media in portraying the ideal beauty image and emphasising slimness as the feminine beauty ideal. Then I present the influence of the slim body ideal on women’s definition of their subjectivities to be able to then locate how women’s bodies in contemporary Saudi society are positioned as a problem that needs to be resolved in order to conform to the beauty ideals. I draw on Foucault’s work on disciplinary power as a useful and most appropriate theoretical framework because disciplinary power operates through power relations, surveillance and technology of the self. In addition, I have chosen to also incorporate Bourdieu’s concepts of symbolic power and family habitus because this adds a dimension of looking
at individuals’ experience among their families which creates their dispositions and thus behaviour. In Chapter 2, I will explain Foucault’s and Bourdieus’s theories in more details.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed justification and description of the methodological design of this research. This chapter outlines my research design and reflects on a number of key issues relating to the conduct of the study. My research’s constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology are illustrated. I discuss and justify the research design and data collection approach both in terms of design, implementation and reflection on fieldwork. I also give an account for participants’ recruitment and describe my participants in a form of family dyads. Also, I illustrate my data analysis procedure and reflect on my role as an ‘insider’ researcher within the Saudi Arabian context and the challenges I encountered. Further, in this chapter I discuss ethical considerations and how my own voice and position as a researcher informed the research findings.

Chapter 4 explores my participants’ narrations about their bodies in mother daughter dyads. It is an introductory analysis chapter that demonstrates who my participants are. It maps out my participants’ narrations and experiences within their daily life and among Saudi society. This chapter gives a deep insight into participants’ bodies’ biographies within the familial context which is important particularly in the collectivist Saudi society. This chapter highlights the nuances of participants’ experiences with weight management practices which will illustrate different family habitus. This chapter gives a solid base to grasp women’s subjectivities and how women with different subjectivities have various experiences in managing their weight.

Chapter 5 discusses further data analysis. This chapter deals with participants’ narrations that highlight the significant cultural and social change in women’s beauty ideals. Social appreciation of slimness among men and women is storied. An important focus and critical contribution of this chapter is the description and analysis of the role of family habitus in forming women’s body image. Using first person descriptions from daughters and mothers, I show how surveillance and symbolic power in everyday life mould the way women evaluate their bodies. The chapter examines disciplinary practices that women apply to control their ‘docile bodies’, and attention is given to the location and exploration of technologies of the self to show how women use them to manage their sensations about their bodies and themselves.

Chapter 6 analyses mother-daughter dyads as a family. This chapter focuses on families in order to investigate the family-body habitus. Each family has shown their unique dispositions of their bodies and thus their shared family habitus towards their
bodies. This chapter illustrates how mother-daughter interrelationships can form and reform women’s subjectivity. Also, it demonstrates the importance of family habitus in women’s decisions of choosing the way they manage their bodies. Analysing family habitus helped the researcher to make sense of women’s behaviours regarding their bodies and their subjectivities.

Chapter 7 concludes this thesis by summarising the research findings in relation to the questions I set out to answer. I demonstrate the theoretical and empirical achievements of the research by addressing each of my research questions and highlighting significant issues emerging from the discussion. For example, men, marriage and women’s gaze were key findings in relation to the research questions. I reiterate the research’s empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions. This chapter closes by further reflecting on the research and building on those reflections already detailed in the methodology chapter. The reflections here extend to identify some of the constraints of the research that could be construed as limitations and these are used as leverage to discuss possible ways for further research to be carried out in the future.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Figure 8 Map of Chapter 2

- Introduction.
- The Social Body, a Metaphor for Culture.
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- Feminine body, Beauty ideals: “slimmer is better”.
- Women and Body image.
- The role of the media in construction of body image.
- Women’s bodies are a ‘problem’.
- Disciplinary Power and Symbolic Power.
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2.1 Introduction

This research explores the weight management practices of Saudi Arabian women, including their experiences, motivation and understanding of their bodies and managing their weight. Additionally, it investigates the socio-cultural factors that shape the women’s weight management practices. This project explores, in particular, the concept of women’s bodies as cultural bodies. This chapter reviews the extant literature on the social body that facilitates the derivation of women’s subjectivities based on their practices concerning their bodies. Firstly, I discuss the body and its relationship to society. Through the existing literature, I demonstrate a shift in the concept of ‘body’ from being merely a biological entity to becoming a metaphor for culture. Prior studies also find ‘thinness’ to be a cultural requirement and feminine beauty ideal. Secondly, I present the theoretical framework for this thesis: the theories that are applied in understanding the women’s subjectivities in relation to their weight management practices. I draw on Michel Foucault’s and Pierre Bourdieu’s social theories and some particular concepts which will help me understand how the women in my research manage their bodies through weight management practices and how different sociocultural norms in the Saudi society shape their understanding of these practices and their subjectivities.

Foucault’s theory of power, as embedded in surveillance, proposes that women’s bodies become ‘docile bodies’. This is exemplified in how the women use disciplinary power and technologies of the self to regulate themselves, through taking care of the body and the psyche. Bourdieu discusses the notion of ‘symbolic power’ that is legitimised by individuals, in a theory compatible with Foucault. Following that, I discuss Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which provides a rationale for how social pressures and family are integrated into women’s subjectivities and thus their practices and their engagement in weight management. Habitus provides insight into a woman’s disposition to behave in a certain way. Moreover, this research looks at the mother and daughter as a family; thus, I also discuss family habitus to understand why the women agree to participate in weight management practices within a familial context.

2.2 The Social Body, a Metaphor for Culture

The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with
certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 84).

Our body is our ‘passport’ to the external world, as it is the first thing other people see, and is what they base their evaluations of us upon. Thus, the body is not merely a physical object (Bordo, 2003); rather it is a social body that is constituted by social life and the interrelationship between an individual’s social location, habitus and taste. Being in a social field, our physical appearance plays a major role in our daily life as it forms the way we see ourselves and the way we interact with others (Howson, 2004). Hence, the social body ensures our consolidation with society and reflects its culture.

Distinguishing the biological body from the social body, Bordo (2003: 16) argues that the ‘biological body’ in Marx’s and Foucault’s work indicates that the body is in the ‘direct grip’ of social and political controls that dictate how it may behave; that is, which gestures, behaviours and daily routines are allowed and which are prohibited. At the ‘biological body’ level, the concern is to understand that the control over this body lies in the mundane level of behaviour applied to society as a whole. Similarly, Shilling (2012) terms the pre-social body as the ‘naturalistic body’ that is basically formed by governmental, legal, and economic elements. Thus, the main concern with the naturalistic or material body is to define its daily life behaviour patterns, and control and legalise its behaviour (Shilling, 2012).

In that sense, differences in individuals and identities, such as taste, class or habitus, are omitted, and all individuals will be similar. Featherstone (1991) refers to the material body as an inner body that needs medical and health care for maintenance, whereas he describes the outer body as a social body formed by, and interacting with, society. However, the definition of the naturalistic body has extended in modern societies. For instance, Goulding et al. (2013) point out another form of physical body as spectacle, machine and commodified. They argue that the naturalistic body is not merely the individual’s property; it also becomes an exhibition for others. For example, in the Body Worlds museum, skinned human bodies are displayed as ‘objects’ with a label describing their anatomy for other humans’ pleasure (Goulding et al., 2013). In that sense, the human body has become a site of attraction, which has been visited by tens of millions of visitors.

The naturalistic body is the ‘spot’ of social, governmental and political concern; hence, it is a physical entity rather than a social representative. This notion suggests that the body has become a receptor for social meaning rather than a meaning generator (Shilling, 2012; Howson, 2004). As the connecting point between the ‘inner’ self of the
individual and ‘external’ world”, the body then becomes a metaphor of culture (Jaggar and Bordo, 1989: 4). Featherstone (1991) bridges the inner and the outer body. He raises the point that by maintaining inner body health and wellbeing, individuals control their outer body. Subsequently, health maintenance practices such as dieting and exercise contribute to forming and reforming the social body. In the 20th century, the ‘explosion of interest’ in the social body became very explicit, especially within consumerism, where the two ‘bodies’ are ‘conjoined’ (Williams and Bendelow, 1998). Gradually, the concern about the body as a material entity has been converted to give an account of the socially constructed body as malleable and docile (Shilling, 2012).

This was not a sudden shift in the concept of the human body. Investigations of the social body through the lenses of sociology and feminism (e.g. Featherstone, Bordo, Shilling, Jagger, Turner) have heightened the significance of the social body as a ‘cultural text’ representing the culture and norms of societies. The understandings previous researchers in this field have garnered facilitates unpacking and understanding the construction of an individual’s subjectivity through their social body. In addition, sociologists can glean how individuals represent their norms and culture through their bodies. Hence, the social body that engages in social interactions and practices cannot be investigated in isolation from its social, cultural, political and psychological influences (McNay, 1992).

Thus, we cannot understand the human body merely as one biological piece; rather we have to look at it as a puzzle constituted of many smaller pieces which consequently form the full picture of the social body. This suggests that our bodies are “unfinished entities which are formed through their participation in social life and … develop through the interrelation between an individual’s social location, habitus and taste” (Shilling, 2012: 130). Reading the social body enables us to understand what is valuable, acceptable, appreciated, rejected or banned by way of values and norms.

Focusing on the body as a ‘cultural text’ has turned societies into ‘somatic’ societies, where the body is located at the centre of social concern as it bears out social and cultural meanings (Turner, 1992). Buchanan-Oliver et al. (2010) perceive the social body as “not a neutral, natural, or objective entity but a central site of representation, heavily invested with multiple, shifting layers of cultural meaning” (Buchanan-Oliver et al., 2010: 636). Buchanan-Oliver et al. (2010) emphasise the concept of the cultural representation of the body. They confirm that the social body is a site that reflects social
and cultural meanings. Therefore, our physical appearance, in terms of body size, shape and gestures, follows a socially constructed pattern (Howson, 2004). In that sense, individuals’ concern of the social body is not limited to the type of food intake or diet or the sort of exercises they are undertaking, rather they become more concerned about the quality of their lives and the cultural meaning they reflect (Cronin et al., 2015).

Receiving cultural meanings and representing them through the body renders individuals to be “like robots, controlled by forces beyond their reach” (Shilling, 2012: 53), which are social and cultural factors. In light of the research questions, this study investigates a social phenomenon, specifically the great appreciation for fitness and slimness among women in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, exploring women’s social bodies and their practices as part of this phenomenon makes sense because “the body is a social phenomenon, and it is essential to the organizing of social phenomena” (Turner, 1992: 94). This is to say, in any given society at any given time and place, the social body is a discursive, constructed entity that embodies social phenomena (Shilling, 2012), which means it carries social meanings. Thus, the social body becomes a symbolic bearer of meaning (Bourdieu, 2010a).

Sociology’s emphasis on studying the social body stems from its significance “to the establishment and maintenance of social life” (Howson, 2004: 2), which entails participation in daily life practices and routines. This statement is the foundation for addressing the research questions. To explore the sociocultural factors influencing women’s participation in weight management practices, it is vital to discover the meanings women embody and how these meanings construct their subjectivities. According to Howson (2004), living in a society is linked to individuals’ presentations of their bodies and the embedded meaning in this. Social life comprises daily life actions, practices and behaviour. These behaviours reflect the culture and norms in different aspects of our lives, such as food, clothing, lifestyle and in the way we perceive ourselves (Hesse-Biber, 1996).

2.2.1 The body in consumer culture

“The social world in which each consumer is embedded operates to enforce and reinforce this system of bodily meanings and practices” (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995: 150). The body is represented in many daily life aspects, such as eating and choice of clothing. Daily life practices, behaviours and consumption vary from one
society to another as they are shaped by culture. Bordo asserts that the social body is “what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body – it is a medium of culture” (Bordo, 2003: 165). This suggests that an understanding of a given society is possible looking into how the social body in that society is perceived. Therefore, analysing the social body has become a vital issue in studying culture or society, and therefore, any particular social phenomenon (Shilling, 2012).

A simple example from daily life demonstrates how the body can serve as a metaphor of culture. Beauty shops in Saudi Arabia for example offer an enormous amount of skin whitening products, which are generally not available in the UK. This is because women’s skin fairness is an important beauty ideal in Saudi society. Conversely, UK beauty shops offer skin-tanning products, which are not popular in Saudi Arabia. This contrast reflects cultural and social preferences within each of the two societies. In that sense, the social body has become “a metaphor of society as a whole” (Shilling, 2012:77). This study explores the meanings and cultural values embedded in women’s social body practices, especially weight control. Such practices are “cultural activities [which are] mediated through consumption” (Jagger, 2000: 46).

Within consumer culture, the body “plays a mediating role between consumer activities and the cultural constitution of the self” (Jagger, 2000: 46). Looking at the body in relation to marketing, we can see the prominence of the body in massive industries, such as diet production markets, fitness equipment and services, cosmetic surgeries, and so on (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). Furthermore, the body has been used as a metaphor in marketing communications, for example in advertising (Buchanan-Oliver et al., 2010). Buchanan-Oliver et al. (2010) offered an illustration of the advertising application of the body as a metaphor of the company’s products. For instance, the body was a metaphor in advertising of technology when they presented the camera lens functioning as accurately as the human eye (Buchanan-Oliver et al., 2010: 639). Therefore, studying the consumer body receives prominent attention from consumer researchers.

Unpacking the social body into its original components, namely social aspects, beliefs and norms, contributes to producing and reproducing and reshaping the social body (Nettleton and Watson, 1998). Women’s participation in various activities related to their bodies classifies this research under the consumer research discipline. Jagger (2000) asserted that ‘consumption’ includes the purchase of goods and services as well
as fitness practices. Cronin et al. (2014a) assert that food consumption – as part of an individual’s identity – is related to social and cultural norms. Individuals as consumers are “motivated by powerful social drives” which play a substantial role in forming social acceptable ideals (Cronin et al., 2014a: 1560). Furthermore, they put emphasis on the consumer body as an aspect that forms individuals’ consumption, in particular, food consumption. Cronin et al. state:

the lived consumer body cannot be examined satisfactorily without acknowledging that bodies are both biological and symbolic, both public and private, capable of both rational and irrational actions and are constantly shifting through time and space, shaping and being shaped by each context they find themselves in. The decisions that bodies make to choose certain foods or to engage in certain food-related behaviours ... are interpreted, embodied and reproduced in day-to-day life (2014a: 1571-2).

In that sense, consumer behaviour and decisions regarding their bodies cannot be comprehended without fully understanding the individual’s daily life, as well as the society in which the individual lives.

Bodily products and services are consumed in pursuit of social acceptance (Featherstone, 1991). This means that social values form the basis or standards of the individual’s goals and aims, and thus explains their consumption. Bourdieu (2010a) maintains that investigating the consumption of products and services is equally as important as considering the purchase of them. For instance, the consumption of diet products in order to control health issues and their well-being is related to the individuals’ quality of life in addition to social acceptance (Cronin et al., 2015). Contrary to contemporary ideals, researchers are concerned with the risk of obesity which is related to high food consumption within consumer culture in modern societies (Cronin et al., 2014a). In that matter, Cronin et al. (2014a) argue that marginalising obese individuals who lack in ‘fitness’ is, culturally, the main attitude which in turn thrusts these obese individuals towards a ‘fitness normality’.

According to Rokeach (1968), individuals seek to achieve what is socially acceptable based on their values. Slimness is a contemporary beauty ideal that is being pursued. This renders women to feel insecure about their bodies and appearance, and feel that they have to make more of an effort to meet social and cultural body ideals (Bordo, 2003). Looking at one of the aspects of this research, slimness, as a criterion of feminine beauty, is one of the most important cultural ideals to be set for women in Western culture.
Food consumption, in particular, is one of the most obvious aspects which is related to the body. Highlighting the importance of consumption in shaping one’s subjectivity, Cronin et al. state:

The consumption of objects and experiences is recognised as a process through which an individual negotiates and constructs him- or herself as masculine or feminine and by which his or her social relationships are formed, maintained and altered (2014b: 367 emphasis in original).

As Cronin et al. (2014b) suggest, men and women have a different relationship to food. They claim that women in particular have a complicated relationship with food which affects building or maintaining relationships. In other words, women are keen to consume good food in order to obtain a fit body. Consequently, they can maintain their relationships and be socially accepted.

Participating in various bodily projects in pursuit of this feminine beauty ideal, such as engaging in numerous experiences to manage their body and control their weight, makes women’s bodies “regulated, normalized, fetishized and commodified in a rage of consumerist discourse” (Jagger, 2000: 55). This corresponds with Cronin et al. (2014b) argument that consumption experiences are part of constructing individuals’ subjectivity. Jagger’s claim renders the investigation of women’s social body and their bodily practices vital in consumer research. Hence, the notion of idealising slimness as a beauty standard and its related practices in the Saudi Arabian context is examined in this research. The next section discusses the feminine body and its beauty ideals.

2.3 Feminine body, Beauty ideals: “slimmer is better”

Chapman’s work on women’s beauty practices argues that the discourse of femininity affirms “the importance of a woman’s appearance, particularly the size of her body, in determining her attractiveness, competence and overall well-being” (Chapman, 1997: 219). Similarly, for sociologists (Frank, 2001; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Bordo, 2003), focusing on women’s bodies is crucial as part of their argument that women’s bodies now stand as a text of femininity. Worldwide, there is considerable appreciation of women’s bodies as being beautiful. As contemporary societies become more visual than ever, women’s body ideals have largely become standardised into a particular body shape: a thin figure (Bordo, 2003). According to Seid, “the quest for a fit, fat-free body has become an … obsession” (1989: 3). As slenderness has become a part of
contemporary societies, it is impossible to ignore the primacy of women’s appearance (Bordo, 2003).

Over time, the ideal female body has become smaller and smaller until it reached stick-thin (Shilling, 2005). However, women are rarely extremely thin unless they are naturally so or starve themselves to be that way (Seid, 1989). Seid claims that such naturally super-thin women comprise a mere 5% of all American women, while the remaining 95% must exert extra effort in the form of dieting and exercise to be ‘thin enough’ (Seid, 1989: 261).

This massive idealisation of the slim female body in Western culture, which has since spread around the world, has become an obsession among women. This has encouraged feminist scholars to work extensively on the topic of women’s bodies and their self-respect, according to Roberta Seid (1989), Kim Chernin (1994), and Susie Orbach. The term ‘obsession’ was used by Seid (1989) and Chernin (1994) to describe Western women’s attitudes towards their bodies. Seid stated that this obsession “occupies or troubles the mind to an extensive degree” (1989: 3). This means that what women think about and behave within their daily life according to their weight and their bodies.

Men are one of the most important elements in women’s daily life that is related to women’s bodies, and, thus, forming their subjectivities. According to Markey et al., “women generally tend to underestimate men’s preferred female figure” which sometimes does not correspond to their own ideal figure (2004: 210). Thus in their beliefs, slimmer women are happier in their marriage than bigger women.

For that reason, women are constantly preoccupied with self-care and body control to obtain and maintain a presentable physical image that is attractive to other people (Orbach, 2006). However, these self-care practices are not as simple as they appear. The high appreciation for thinness is just “the tip of iceberg” among multiple and complex factors that need to be analysed (Bordo, 2003). This indicates the complexity of the pressure that women encounter to achieve the required slenderness to meet social beauty ideals (Prohaska and Gailey, 2009). Therefore, women are enormously involved in the phenomenon of idealising and seeking slimness, much more than men (Bordo, 2003).

The issue of being fascinated by manipulating bodies’ appearance and managing the body to appear in a particular way is not entirely a new idea among women. In the Victorian era, i.e. the nineteenth century, wearing a corset to present a tiny waist was a beauty ideal for women (Steele, 1999). While the corset was worn for tightening the waist, it was also a tool for managing the upper body of women to showcase thus their
reproductive parts, one being the breasts. The idea of controlling the size and shape of women’s bodies is similar throughout history despite differences in the content of the ideas and their applications. In contemporary societies, women’s bodies have been assigned as icons or objects of beauty that are required to be beautiful, sexy and attractive all the time (Prohaska and Gailey, 2009; Orbach, 2005). Hence, women apply different techniques to control their bodies, such as dieting and exercise (Hesse-Biber, 1996). Women keep pursuing thinness and the ideal weight because:

Thinness gives women access to a number of important resources; feelings of power, self-confidence, even femininity; male attention or protection; and the social and the economic benefits that can follow (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 67).

This means that a woman’s physical appearance can determine many aspects of her social life. In other words, her body is linked to her social worth. That is to say, women’s bodies are much more associated with their social life and their subjectivities than men’s. Bordo (2003) argues that a woman’s body is the hub of her daily life as far as bodily practices are practiced within everyday life. It also plays a role in her social relations. Women tend to look after their bodies to obtain social appreciation and to be socially acceptable. Meeting the social criteria of beauty by having a beautiful slim body and a nice physical appearance is part of the process of gaining social appreciation. For women, being pretty, slim and having a beautiful physical appearance directly influences their social relations and their position within the social hierarchy, and therefore plays a large role in their feelings and the way they define their subjectivities.

Diamond (1985) suggested that the ‘fat and thin’ dichotomy is problematic, as the former is against the cultural ideal, whilst the latter is a characteristic of the body and a goal to achieve. As mentioned before, women are always seeking beauty and to improve their appearance, as this is the first thing to be noticed and judged. Based on social rules and ideals, contemporary societies not only link thinness with health and fatness with illness, but they also make a connection between beauty and thinness and between fatness and ugliness (Jester, 2009). Media and other social aspects nearly always portray slim women as pretty and fat women as ugly. Thus, society works as a judge, classifying women into social positions based on their body size and appearance, which is often based on their participation in self-care practices. When this social categorisation for women is applied, it takes the form of rewarding or punishing women according to their success or failure in following social rules and achieving slim bodies (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 67).
This indicates that women’s application of self-care practices is an important matter in their social lives.

Women have therefore modified their self-care behaviour and tend to spend much more time improving, controlling and disciplining their bodies than they did in the past (Bordo, 2003). This change in women’s interest in their bodies and the amount of time spent working on, disciplining and grooming their bodies is a sign of cultural change and their attempt to conform to this change. Women work on their bodies as ‘a project’ to achieve their beauty ideal, which, in contemporary society, is slimness. In that sense, many feminists argue that self-care practices can be classified as ‘feminine’ practices that are applied in order to fulfil feminine ideals (Bartky, 1988).

In her book Never too thin: why women are at war with their bodies, Seid (1989) discussed the history and development of the ideal of thinness throughout American history, and how society shifted from an appreciation for a woman’s full body in the past to the idealisation of the stick-thin body in contemporary society. She also discussed the contemporary obsession with fit and slim bodies among women. She stated:

At least 75 percent of us with normal or below-normal weight think we need to lose a few more pounds. Food, diets, and exercise dominate our thoughts and conversation as they dominate the magazines we read, the television programs we watch, and the beauty and health advice we hear. We are never thin enough to believe we are not fat. We are not taut enough to believe we are not flabby. We can never diet and exercise enough to believe we do not have to diet and exercise more (Seid, 1989: 257).

Seid published her book in 1989, when body weight and size was not a matter of discussion within Saudi society. Reading her work, Seid reflects on the importance and pervasive presence of weight and body issues at that time within Western society. She maintains that Western women constantly feel that they ‘ought to’ lose weight. They are not satisfied with their bodies regardless of their actual size and weight. Seid provided an overview of how Western culture has shaped the way women perceive and feel about themselves and about their bodies. Thus, they are involved in various practices to control their bodies. Despite specifying a percentage (75%) of women who are dissatisfied with their bodies, Seid did not refer to any particular statistical study in support of this claim. Rather, she sought to reflect a general sense about American women’s reality with regard to their bodies. In short, slimness as a matter of the social female body and its implications
for social life is an old notion in the Western societies which has become a recent phenomenon in Saudi society.

Moreover, Seid (1989) highlighted the issue of the influence of the biological body over the social body. The appreciation of thinness, which is a social body issue, has partially come from health scientists’ approval of a slim body. They are concerned about health, and link fatness with chronic disease. Nevertheless, Seid (1989) also suggested that even scientists’ arguments and concern for thinness versus fatness stem from a wider cultural and social appreciation for thinness. This suggests that culture even has the power to influence science in forming people’s ideas and setting criteria for evaluation. Overall, women still believe that thinness represents health and beauty (Seid, 1989), whereas fatness represents ugliness and lack of self-control.

Likewise, Kim Chernin (1994) used the word ‘obsession’ in the title of her book to give the reader an idea of how pervasive the idea of looking after the body to achieve slimness is among women. In her book *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, Chernin (1994) reflects on Western women’s preoccupation with their bodies and how that affects their subjectivities and social lives. She describes the struggle between women and food as two contradicting aspects, presenting and interpreting a number of stories about individual women’s daily life experiences with their bodies. The stories are not only about women she interviewed; she also includes herself and her own personal experience with weight and body issues. Chernin herself suffered from an eating disorder and an obsession with her weight and body image, serving as the motivation for writing the book. Thus, she studied women with similar experiences with their bodies.

Though published more than two decades ago, Chernin’s and Seid’s books resonate with the pressure that women in contemporary Saudi society face to keep thin and fit. This indicates the spread of Western notions and beauty ideals to different cultural contexts. On the other hand, it also indicates the amount of time that it took for this phenomenon to reach a different cultural and societal context. The phenomenon referred to is that of placing great emphasis on beauty ideals, fitness and care of the body (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001). This research sheds light on the fact that the obsession with weight and physical appearance is no longer limited to Western women, rather it has spread to Arabic countries as part of Westernisation. However, as the phenomenon took time to spread, a gap remains in the literature on the Saudi Arabian context.

This wide appreciation for slimness has exaggerated the rejection of fuller bodies, linking ugliness with a few extra kilos to the extent that women see it as a big issue in
their lives (Hesse-Biber, 1996). Bartky asserts that “under the current ‘tyranny of slenderness’ women are forbidden to become larger or massive; they must take up as little space as possible” (1988: 101). Furthermore, ‘Fat Studies’ has emerged as a new field of studying the unwanted, undesired body, bringing fat people within the scope of being an oppressed social group (Maor and Cwikel, 2016: 14). The field of fat studies is more focused on women than men, as fatness is widely considered a feminist issue (Orbach, 2006). Some studies about obesity have been done on the mother and daughter familial level. For instance, Maor (2012) study points out the role of the mother and daughter relationship in constructing ‘fat identity’. Moreover, Orbach’s (2006) book, *Fat is a feminist issue*, demonstrates how fatness is an issue centred on women and plays a major role in isolating women from society, as “fat is a social disease” (2006: 22). Women who fail to keep themselves slim and fit often suffer from low self-confidence (Fikkan and Rothblum, 2012).

This sort of study, which has emerged as a contrast to the idealisation of thinness, I argue, reflects the change in society’s structure in terms of placing a particular social group – those with slim bodies – in a superior place in the social hierarchy, and consequently situating the other group – those with fat bodies – in an inferior place. This puts individuals with fuller bodies in the category of an oppressed group. Thus, the phenomenon of idealising thinness and disparaging fatness divides individuals into two social groups based on their body weight, ignoring other criteria such as social position, economic status and intelligence. Essentially, body weight has become the measurement tool to allocate individuals within a social hierarchy. This means that an individual woman could move from one social position in the social hierarchy to another based on her weight and physical appearance.

Despite the great emphasis on the slim body ideal within cultures and the media, scientists confirm that the nature of women’s bodies is genetically heavier than the body images presented in the media and thus in society (Yamamiya et al., 2005). Yamamiya et al. (2005: 79) propose that in ‘appearance-obsessed societies’, the social and institutional emphasis on ‘unrealistic’ beauty and body ideals should be changed to more natural ideals that are closer to the average normal body, rather than idealising an unnaturally slim physical appearance.

To date, there are no social studies analysing the body ideal among Saudi women. However, there are some scientific studies that have looked at obesity, health, well-being and body satisfaction. For instance, Al-Otaibi et al. (2013) investigated body
dissatisfaction among both male and female Saudi university students. Their quantitative study found that more females had a negative body image than males, and therefore were more prone to body dissatisfaction. Body image satisfaction is defined in the literature as the degree to which individuals are satisfied with their physical appearance, especially weight and shape (Holsen et al., 2012: 201). The next section reviews the literature on women’s body image in the light of the ideal social body.

2.3.1 Women and Body image

It is difficult to discuss women’s body ideals and attempts at beauty and perfection without mentioning how women see and evaluate their own bodies, that is, their body image. Body image is a major concept that is linked to “sexuality and fantasies … a key feature of modern marketing to search control over one’s own body” (Askegaard et al., 2002: 795). A review of the literature reveals a significant amount of research on women’s body image and its interrelationship with women’s subjectivities. In addition, daily newspapers and magazines often discuss many aspects of women’s body image. Wiseman (2012) wrote an article in The Guardian entitled “Uncomfortable in our Skin: The Body-Image Report”. She noted that almost 90% of British women are concerned about their appearance, and that a high percentage of young girls have eating disorders due to their poor body image. Wiseman (2012) placed blame upon the fashion industry for idealizing size zero, the model’s size, and thus embedding this in the individual’s subconscious as the ideal and perfect body they should have reached. Not only the fashion industry, but also celebrities in tabloid media are glorified using Photoshop and airbrushing, which also contributes to women’s poor body image and makes them feel even more anxious about their body than ever before.

Over the past 50 years, women’s awareness of, and interest in, their body size and physical appearance has increased enormously, in parallel with the development of the fashion industry (Orbach, 2005). In sociology, there are many studies that affirm the relationship between body image, as the subjective experience, and individuals’ behaviour, feelings and attitudes towards their bodies. Women’s body shape and size are related to their confidence and self-esteem (Johns and Johns, 2000). Therefore, studying body image, as part of understanding individuals’ behaviour, is vital.

Body image, or the ‘inside view’, is one of the crucial concepts that helps define the cultural factors that influence women’s definition of their subjectivities and
consequently their body-related behaviour (Cash, 2004). Schilder defines body image as “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say the way in which the body appears to ourselves” (Schilder, 1964: 11). So, body image is our configuration about our bodies and how we think we “appear to others” (Featherstone, 2010: 193). Moreover, Cash claims that body image refers to “body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours” (Cash, 2004: 1-2). Thus, it is related to the way that individuals believe that they appear to others, and this affects their lives. Each individual has a unique body image that influences their lives in a distinctive way.

Body image does not necessarily reflect reality. Individuals may have a body image different from their actual physical appearance, depending on many factors, such as family, culture and mindset. Researchers have qualified body image into two major types, ‘negative and positive body image’. Individuals can be categorised as having a negative body image when they find their bodies more “distressing and inhibiting than ordinary body dissatisfaction” (Rosen et al., 1995: 26). When an individual constructs a positive body image, he/she feels that others evaluate them positively on sight, and thus they feel more satisfied with their bodies. Wood-Barcalow et al. summarised a comprehensive positive body definition. They list body satisfaction as a main aspect of positive body image. This satisfaction allows individuals to:

(a) appreciate the unique beauty of their body and the functions that it performs for them; (b) accept and even admire their body, including those aspects that are inconsistent with idealized images; (c) feel beautiful, comfortable, confident, and happy with their body, which is often reflected as an outer radiance, or a “glow;” (d) emphasize their body’s assets rather than dwell on their imperfections; (e) have a mindful connection with their body’s needs; and (f) interpret incoming information in a body-protective manner whereby most positive information is internalized and most negative information is rejected or reframed (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010: 112).

In short, all positive, uplifting and good feelings about one’s body constitute a positive body image. In contrast, negative body image makes individuals constantly dissatisfied with themselves and indicates a false evaluation of their own bodies. This means that body image has a much more powerful influence on individuals’ lives than how they actually look (Cash, 2004). This makes body image a complex concept that needs to be unpacked to understand what informs the way women see their own bodies.
Indeed, body image is a ‘multidimensional’ concept that needs to be unpacked to its components to understand how women construct it (Muth and Cash, 1997).

Despite the fact that some studies have looked at body image in men (Grogan and Richards, 2002; Frank, 2014), the vast majority report that women’s body image is more influential, pervasive and powerful than men’s. Accordingly, many researchers in gender and advertising focus particularly on women rather than men in investigating body image (Beetles and Harris, 2005). Sociologists’ predisposition to study women’s body image is based on previous studies that assert the greater significance of body image to women in forming their subjectivities in contemporary societies. Muth and Cash (1997) investigated gender differences in terms of body image satisfaction. They found that women tend to have a negative body image because they usually see and evaluate themselves as bigger than their actual size – even those women who fall within the normal range of body weight according to BMI charts.

In comparison to men, women also show higher body dissatisfaction. These expressions of negative body image or body dissatisfaction motivate women to have greater participation in practices to manage their bodies (Muth and Cash, 1997). Muth and Cash concluded that nearly half of all American women have a negative body image and are dissatisfied with their appearance. Thus, women are more decisive about, and persistent in, managing and improving their physical appearance. Grabe et al. (2008) suggest that around half of female American undergraduates are not satisfied with their bodies, regardless of their body size. They claim that there is a great emphasis on women’s thinness in all media sources. That increases women’s body dissatisfaction and its related behavioural, psychological and social issues.

Unpacking the body image concept, researchers have agreed on some key points that contribute to the formation of body image. Culture is the basis upon which women’s body image is formed and how they see and evaluate their own physical appearance, which also subsequently influences their self-concept (Orbach, 2005). Paquette and Raine (2004) claim that body image is not a fixed concept, rather is dynamic in relation to its component factors. They list the sociocultural factors that mould Western women’s body image: the media, partners, family, and friends – i.e. women’s social networks (Paquette and Raine, 2004: 1056).

Different cultural beauty ideals also contribute to body image amongst women in different societies. This consideration is based on a cultural perception that women’s bodies are viewed as icons of beauty much more than men’s bodies are. Fallon (1990)
asserts that women in societies that appreciate thinness are more likely to develop negative body image, and thus eating disorders, than women in other societies.

In consumer culture discourses, body image has been given considerable attention as a detrimental factor influencing consumer behaviour. Hence, studying the body in contemporary society has become a vital issue. Featherstone asserts that “consumer culture is obsessed with the body” (Featherstone, 2010: 197). I argue that investigating women’s body image can help in understanding women’s behaviour regarding managing their bodies and consuming weight management products and services. Within the Saudi Arabian context, only a few studies have been conducted investigating women’s body image and related practices. However, these studies were quantitative, as they used questionnaires, surveys and statistical approaches to consider this issue from a medical point of view. Moreover, these studies overlooked women’s emotions, experiences, and feelings about their bodies. They ignored the societal, cultural and familial nuances that shape this image.

Body image, either positive or negative, can play a role in determining women’s involvement in practices to manage their bodies, such as dieting and exercising. As mentioned above, body image does not necessarily match the body’s actual weight and shape; it depends on the individual’s attitude to and understanding of their body and their social ideals. It has been proven that normal-weight women often incorrectly see themselves as overweight (Muth and Cash, 1997). This research study on women’s body image illuminates the motivations that contribute to women’s participation in various weight management practices.

For example, Abdel-Fattah et al. (2008) examined women’s body image among overweight Saudi women who regularly visit a dietitian to lose weight. They used two types of questionnaires to survey 236 women. They concluded that overweight women are so concerned about their physical appearance that they take up weight management practices. In addition, overweight women have a negative body image, as they see themselves as larger than they really are. This leads them to be more socially isolated than normal-weight women. The women in their study, with a poor body image, nevertheless were seeking to lose weight by consulting a dietitian. The study looked at their body image and its relationship to depression. They found that there is no difference among overweight and normal weight women in terms of body image and body satisfaction, as all of their participants reported body dissatisfaction.
One of the prominent factors that scholars refer to as an effective contributor in determining women’s body image is the media. They affirm the relationship between exposure to various media and body satisfaction among female consumers based on social and self-comparison with the ideal images shown in advertisements (Richins, 1991; Grabe et al., 2008). Paquette and Raine (2004) point out that amongst the sociocultural factors that influence women’s body image, the media is considered the most powerful. They attribute women’s dissatisfaction with their bodies to “the transmission of norms of thinness through the mass media, specifically advertising by the fashion, beauty and cosmetic industries” (Paquette and Raine, 2004: 1048). Thus, they confirm the vital role of media in presenting a very specific body shape, which ultimately influences women’s body image.

2.3.2 The role of the media in constructing body image

The media have gained prominent attention among social researchers as a facet of everyday life that contributes to constructing a woman’s body image. To understand how this occurs, it is first necessary to explore how the media operate within cultures and societies. The media serve as a link between communication and culture (Kellner, 1994). Indeed, the media embody cultural content in their various methods, such as images, videos and sounds. In this manner, the media emphasise and assert cultural values in a broader and more explicit way. Therefore, there is a mutual relationship between culture and media, as they are mediated by each other: “there is no communication without culture and there is no culture without communication” (Kellner, 1994: 35). Thus, the correlation between these two elements is vital in contemporary societies; consequently, the impact of media as a cultural mediatory on individuals is significant.

In Western societies, the idealisation of the ‘super-slim’ and ‘stick-thin’ body as a beauty ideal has emerged under the influence of many factors, only some of which are the media and the fashion industry (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 28). In any case, it is clear that the representation of women in the media is characterised by idealising slimness and rejecting fatness. The images thus presented in various media have spurred women’s attention to their bodies and appearance (Hesse-Biber, 1996).

O’Mahony and Hall (2007) assert that media are constantly presenting thin models in women’s fashion magazines and television reinforcing thus thinness as women’s body ideal. Celebrities are shown to be slim, glamorous, healthy and happy (Featherstone,
This vivid image of slim, sexy women – not only celebrities and stars, but also any ‘perfect woman’s body’ figure – is conveyed through advertising and the like. This excessive emphasis on the ideal woman’s body as slim has attracted the attention of consumer culture researchers.

Moreover, the presentation of the thin body image is nothing more than what society has constructed as an ideal body and a beauty image. This means that what is presented in the media is a ‘polished’ reflection of social reality. The media reflect what society appreciates and values as ideals. Regarding women, the emphasis on thinness as a beauty ideal that should be achieved places a heavy burden on women to conform to it (Bautista et al., 2012), despite its being an “unrealistic … rarely real” figure (Derenne and Beresin, 2006: 258).

Since media functions as a tool of representing culture, it has an influence on shaping women’s body image. One of the aspects that forms the ideal body image presented in the media is the male gaze. Giovanelli and Ostertage (2009) argue that contemporary media idealises and evaluates women’s bodies from a masculine viewpoint. In that sense, the media operate as a tool of power that being exercised on women’s bodies. Accordingly, the thinness ideal is imprinted on individuals’ minds as how a woman should look, move and behave (Bordo, 2003).

The ideal body image presented in each society is different based on the values and beauty standards of that culture. As discussed previously, body image studies affirm that media plays a major role in constructing women’s body image, thus influencing the practices which are related to body image. These body-related practices aim to control, manage, maintain and groom the body. Therefore, through media consumption, women develop and internalise an ideal female figure, which they compare themselves to.

For example, Prichard and Tiggemann (2012) investigate the influence of music video clips on body image among women. They found that music video clips, which are very popular in Western societies, can be explicitly linked with body dissatisfaction. The primary aim of these video clips is ostensibly entertainment. However, because media content reflects and exaggerates cultural ideals and values, they (un)intentionally influence women and the way they see and evaluate their bodies. This study reflects how media outlets function as cultural mediators in shaping women’s body image, whether positively or negatively. Advertising also works with other media channels in propagating and emphasising women’s body and beauty ideals. In advertisements, as a
channel of media, images of women are turned into ‘sexual imagery’, which basically focuses on the body and physical appearance (Beetles and Harris, 2005).

Similarly, O'Mahony and Hall (2007) found in their study that women are strongly influenced by the body images presented in the media, including television, magazines and movies. Consumption of these media increases their concern about their physical appearance. Consequently, their body image becomes a major issue for them, manifested by their choices of healthier and lighter food in order to achieve and maintain their ideal body. Here, the media role is in idealising thinness by linking it to beauty and health. This constant affirmation of beauty ideals can be said to have power over women. In this regard, the media, as a cultural mediator tool, constructs individuals’ body image.

There are many studies investigating the issue of body image and its relationship with the media (Zukin and Maguire, 2004; Tiggemann and Kuring, 2004; Spurgas, 2005; Yamamiya et al., 2005; Grabe et al., 2008; Featherstone, 2010). The media also spread and assert women’s thin-body ideal through glamourizing fashion models and celebrities. This has a negative impact on women by increasing their body dissatisfaction much more than with men (Yamamiya et al., 2005; Grogan, 2008). Grabe et al. (2008) claim that the media presentation of very thin women as a body ideal – which is against the natural body size of the vast majority of the population – leads women to adopt unhealthy ways of controlling their weight. Their study, which examined the sharp increase in the thin female body ideal in the media, concluded that there is a robust relationship between idealising the thin body in the media and disturbance in body image among women. The findings of their study, they confirm, resonate with Groesz et al. (2002), who emphasised that the representation of women’s bodies in the media influences body dissatisfaction amongst ordinary women. Also, women felt unhappy and uncomfortable about themselves generally, not only with regard to their bodies (Groesz et al., 2002). In short, beauty articles and magazines emphasising a healthy lifestyle through diet and exercise to maintain a healthy, slim body. Indeed, within same magazines we can find many adverts promote weight control supplements, which, according to health scientists, are not a healthy way to lose weight (Derenne and Beresin, 2006). This contradiction reflects two major aspects around women slimness.

In consumer culture, as part of the wider society, the body has become an obsession in terms of idealising it and linking it with celebrities and role models who exemplify thinness, beauty and youthfulness (Featherstone, 2010). Yamamiya et al. (2005) explained the mechanisms of media influence upon women’s body image. They
posit that there are two levels of response to media exposure; what the media present as the ideal body, and how society processes these images and uses them as a basis for comparison. For women, exposure to the thin-body ideal presented in the media – even for five minutes – leads them to internalise this image and accept it as an ideal figure to achieve. This ‘internalisation’ of the ideal body image reinforces a feeling of inferiority and thus women’s awareness of weight and body control (Yamamiya et al., 2005; Grabe et al., 2008). This raises the standard that women should reach to achieve a beauty ideal and earn social appreciation (Yamamiya et al., 2005:75). It thus contributes to disturbances in women’s body images, which are especially pervasive among young women who have highly internalised the body ideal, in addition to responding strongly to negative social comparison.

The idealisation of slimness in contemporary societies has allocated all the responsibility for achieving the desirable slim body to the individual (Tischner and Malson, 2008). In that sense, the media not only affirm and exaggerate how women’s bodies should be presented, but also suggest the technologies, such as dieting, exercise and cosmetic surgery, that women could apply to achieve that ideal figure (Yamamiya et al., 2005). Through various channels, media advise women with different methods and techniques to achieve and maintain a beautiful, fit and sexy body (Shilling, 2012). This has increased women’s awareness and caused them to try to control their bodies, applying different weight management practices or even developing eating disorders (Grabe et al., 2008). Ideally, this presentation of how to achieve and maintain a thin body is reinforced by the beauty and health market in one way or another. The media implicitly sends messages to women that they are not slim enough, not beautiful enough, and this requires them to apply different techniques to manage their appearance (Derenne and Beresin, 2006). In the following sections I discuss the situation of women’s bodies in contemporary societies and how they become problematized.

2.4 Women’s bodies are a ‘problem’

The female body is regarded as “a problem to be solved” (Maor, 2012: 99) as well as “flawed and requiring cosmetic ‘solutions’” (Beale et al., 2016: 379). Hence, pursuing and attaining slimness has become a “panacea” as women believe that “their problems stem from being overweight” (Cronin et al., 2014b: 370). The appreciation of thinness as the feminine body ideal is not limited to Western societies; rather it is extending out
globally. As the ideal woman’s body is becoming smaller, women struggle to reduce their weight through practising more control over their bodies in order to feel in command of, rather than being controlled by, their bodies (Orbach, 2005: 130). This is why women become ‘hooked’ by the fashion and weight management industry, which finds them to be an easy group to sell their products to (Orbach, 2006).

Interestingly, women’s bodies are not merely problematic in terms of social acceptance, but also in terms of their relation with food. Cronin et al. (2014b) confirm that food-related behaviour is one of the most ‘gendered’ behaviours, for example, cooking and feeding the family are commonly considered ‘women’s tasks’. From their perspective, Cronin et al. (2014b) argue that women’s relationship with food plays a major role in forming their subjectivities. If women could not control their appetite for food, then food will be a threatening factor which affects their body shape and thus their ‘sexual attractiveness’ (Cronin et al., 2014b). In other words, food contributes to ‘problematizing’ women’s bodies in their societies.

Contemporary societies provide several solutions to solving the body problem. This entails managing and controlling the individual’s body weight and shape, especially women’s. Based on societies’ demands on women’s bodies, solutions have been developed including improvements in food industry and cosmetic technologies. These technologies contribute to making women’s bodies more malleable so they can be shaped by their own will.

There are many options for women to choose a technology by which they aim to control their bodies. This is because the social body has become “a phenomenon of options and choices” (Shilling, 2012: 3). Hence, it is women’s duty to find the best technology and manage the body without failure (Giddens, 2008) based on the variety of available solutions, as it is socially unacceptable to remain ‘fat’ without addressing this problem.

Responding to the social pressure to achieve a fit body, the market offers a variety of tools to help women follow social and health rules. As the technology and industry of weight management grows enormously, the consumption of weight control products has increased globally. The idea of joining a diet club to control body weight reached its peak in America in 1977 when members of Weight Watchers numbered 9 million (Seid, 1989: 168). During the 1990s, American women believed that they had to consume diet products and services in order to lose weight or to control their bodies. Hence, the “female market” became an enormous business industry (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 39). Companies
promise their consumers that they will lose weight quickly and effectively using their products and services. Hesse-Biber (1996) claims that many women believe that in order to lose weight they need to buy something, whether it be a pill, a food plan, or a membership of a self-help group.

As the market reflects culture, it refers back to society to shape its products and services. Shilling posits that “managing the self has become increasingly tied up with consumer goods” (2012: 92). This notion has dramatically increased the variety of options available to cure obesity or even to maintain a slim body; and its popularity has grown. It has become an autonomous industry. O'Mahony and Hall (2007) confirm that, despite the influence of the body ideal presented in the media on women’s diets, the healthy food market and the variety of products and services on offer that claim to help in maintaining a healthy weight put more pressure on women to achieve the ideal body. Therefore, they claim that the diet market could be considered one of the sociocultural factors influencing women’s body image and weight management practices (O'Mahony and Hall, 2007).

Women research and evaluate the available technologies to manage their bodies and then choose to adopt a particular technique. Dieting, diet products, exercising, cosmetic surgery and gastric surgery are all becoming increasingly popular. Increasingly, in modern societies, women turn to see their bodies as ‘problems’ to be ‘solved’ by undergoing cosmetic surgeries (Askegaard et al., 2002). All of these products and services contribute to form the consumer’s social body. Joy and Venkatesh argue that “in consumer behaviour, the term ‘consumption’ itself presupposes the body” (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994: 335). In other words, they claim that the body is basically the centre of consuming products and services. Jagger (2000) agrees with Joy and Venkatesh’s notion of the relationship between consumption and body. In Jagger’s words, consumption is any “purchase or use of goods, leisure activities and services such as shopping for clothes, dining out and engaging in fitness regimes or other bodily projects” (2000: 46). I can conclude from these definitions that the social body constitutes a platform for a large market of products and services.

Weight control products and services are not only socially influenced; they have, in fact, a more formal source. Health scientists play a role in emphasising particular techniques for managing the body on a scientific basis. Their advice aims to inform people that a healthy body weight should be within a certain BMI range, which is socially considered thin (Tischner and Malson, 2008). In their view, they promote dieting and
exercise as healthy and safe strategies to reduce body weight. This way, they bring these two particular options to the fore, and they are widely regarded as part of a healthy lifestyle. Simply put, health scientists advise us to ‘eat less!’ and ‘move more!’ (Tischner and Malson, 2008). In this way they highlight the great benefits of maintaining a healthy weight to keep the body healthy. To make it clear for people, they publish a BMI chart with weight and height. Idealising weight and limiting it to a chart according to height puts extra pressure on women to achieve that ideal weight (Hesse-Biber, 1996).

This health scientists’ advice emphasising thinness as a healthy body condition goes hand in hand with the social demand for women to achieve a thin body. Society requires women to be slim based on beauty and cultural ideals. Scientists confirm this based on their knowledge, and suggest weight management techniques that are clear to follow, to achieve the desired body. According to social and scientific criteria, women assess themselves as over, under or ideal weight based on the body mass index (BMI) chart, their reflection in the mirror, body measurements, and comparison to thin women (in the media) or comments from family and friends about their bodies (Hesse-Biber, 1996). Nevertheless, Duncan (1994) argues that women prioritise their appearance over their health in their justification for managing weight. Thus, for women, “Feeling Good Means Looking Good” (Duncan, 1994: 51).

Within the Saudi Arabian context, the available options that women can apply to manage and control their weight and body shape are: following a diet plan with a dietician, joining a diet club, joining a gym, and medical and surgical options, such as gastric operations and liposuction. All of these options are available but vary in popularity. The most common strategies used by Saudi women are dieting and exercise, as “women are expected to be thin and firm with exercise and dieting” (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 44).

The following section presents the theoretical framework which this research is based upon.

2.5 Disciplinary Power and symbolic power

Foucault’s account of the body is significant because he describes it as the ‘entity’ that is related to power that is practised and the centre of power relations (McNay, 1991). Foucault defines the social body as “the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self … and a volume in perpetual disintegration” (1977b: 148). Throughout his work, Foucault (1977; 1978; 1980) has
written prominent theories on the human body as a site of social, governmental and political power. He claims that in all societies, the human body functions as a site of control, power application, commitments and taboos (Foucault, 1977a). His theories revolve around the notion of power and power relations among individuals in their societies. In that sense, Foucault sees the social body as a result of power relations that control individuals’ relationships and intersections.

As Foucault argues, the social body is a culturally constructed entity that is constituted within discursive formation. He defines discursive formation as “the general enunciative system that governs a group of verbal performances” (Foucault, 2002: 130). This means individuals are governed by what society constitutes and approves for its culture as the discourse unfolds. Indeed, discursive formation – social norms – is the way in which reality and truth are structured and ordered in every society. Discourse, which functions as truth, comprises the guidelines for exercising power, as power cannot be applied without knowing the truth (Foucault, 1980).

Foucault claims that power is located everywhere in daily life and is not limited to one single source. Power exists within everyday life experiences and interactions. In other words, power can be located in social and cultural norms that are taken for granted by individuals as truth. Indeed, power is something that cannot be held by a particular person, rather it is exchangeable among individuals in the form of power relations. As Foucault put it, “power applies itself to everyday life and the processes in which we are categorized and that are attached to our own identities” (Foucault, 1982: 781). To put it differently, all human relationships are considered power relations. In that sense, the social body operates and functions through power relations and functions as a “metaphor of collective embodiment of the targets of power” (Hewitt, 1991: 232).

In Foucault’s rationale, power is not repressive and negative; rather it is productive and positive (McNay, 1992). This means power does not operate hierarchically as suppression from the top but is exchangeable on the same level by regulating and disciplining individuals’ behaviour rather than oppressing them (Davis, 1995). To clarify, when power operates among individuals, they manage and control their own behaviour accordingly. By regulating individuals’ own behaviour, power is productive in the sense that it stimulates individuals to behave in a certain way (Foucault, 1980). The body is located at the centre of power relations. So the social body is a representation of power (Turner, 1992). Thus, investigating the social body is crucial for
examining “how different subjectivities are constructed and authorized as the truth through the disciplinary discourse of power” (Davis, 1995: 43).

The social body is a carrier of power and a subject for power relations. In the light of that, Foucault offered the concept of disciplinary power. Power and the body are parallels; they are connected and function through each other. Power invests itself upon the body in many forms. Foucault (1980) asserted that individuals apply disciplinary power on their own bodies as a form of controlling their bodies. Thus, disciplinary power is being exercised on individuals’ bodies through different disciplinary practices, such as dieting, exercise and grooming. In other words, disciplinary practices that individuals apply to regulate their bodies are forms of power investment on the body. This is to say, power is the key that constitutes individuals, as it is “everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1990: 93).

Foucault locates power as deep in forming individuals’ behaviour, as it “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (1980:39). Therefore, power cannot be detached from practice, it only becomes power when it is practised between individuals (Faubion, 2000). Thus, Foucault approaches power as the force of constructing behaviour rather than banning actions. He gives an example of how disciplinary power can be productive for individuals: “We find a new mode of investment which presents itself no longer in the form of control by repression but that of control by stimulation. ‘Get undressed – but be slim, good-looking, tanned!’” (Foucault, 1980: 57). In that sense, Foucault pointed out the ‘microphysics’ where disciplinary power is practised on individuals by themselves (Chapman, 1997).

Despite Foucault placing tremendous emphasis on the ‘body’ and bodily practices throughout his work, he did not distinguish between men’s and women’s bodies in terms of power and social position within modern life (Bartky, 1988). Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power has drawn many feminists’ attention (Bartky, 1988; McNay, 1992; Phelan, 1990; Deveaux, 1994). Feminists have applied his theory to understanding women’s experiences within patriarchal societies (Ramazanoglu, 2002). This research study investigates women’s experiences, motivations and subjectivities in relation to their bodies. To understand women’s subjectivities within their society, it is helpful to grasp the notion of power and how power relations work upon women’s bodies to regulate them (Davis, 1995). For instance, Bartky (1988), in her article, drew on Foucault’s theory of power within patriarchal modern societies. She applied Foucault’s perspective to analyse
women’s body control through disciplinary practices in order to produce a feminine body image. Moreover, she looked at how power operates upon women through surveillance and disciplinary power.

When it comes to investigating women’s body control, Bordo (2003) states that Foucault’s notion of power is a feasible tool to study the sociocultural factors influencing their behaviours. Hence, in this research, I draw on Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power as a constructive shaping power that women apply upon their bodies to control their weight. Analysing power as Foucault suggests helps me, as a researcher, to understand how women’s subjectivities are shaped by their weight management experiences.

2.5.1 Surveillance and the social body

According to Foucault, panoptic surveillance is an instrument of applying power over individuals’ bodies (Foucault, 1977a). In Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1977a) develops a theory around how surveillance structures contemporary societies. This ‘surveillance’ functions as a form of power to regulate individuals, not with a corporeal or material force, but by applying the ‘power of mind over mind’ (Foucault, 1977a). Foucault uses the example of the Panopticon. The Panopticon is a tool of practising disciplinary power over individuals. It refers to constant surveillance that regulates individuals’ behaviour, though they cannot identify its presence.

Foucault borrowed the concept of the Panopticon from the building designed by Jeremy Bentham, the British philosopher. In the 19th century, Bentham designed the structure of a new type of prison he called the Panopticon, where prisoners were being or thought they were being watched at all times. It is a round or ring building with prisoners’ cells opening towards a central tower. This tower, in the centre of the prison ring, has wide windows to provide for clear observation of the cells. The guards can monitor the prisoners all the time, but the latter do not know when they are being observed. Hence, the idea of this structure was to place all prisoners under constant surveillance, or at least the feeling of that, in order to regulate their behaviour. Accordingly, to control their behaviour, all prisoners would then permanently apply self-surveillance as if they were being watched continuously. This constant surveillance can assure the “automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977a: 201).
To clarify his theory, Foucault explains it with a similar example of a prison and prisoners to manifest the core of disciplinary power within societies. In that illustration the panoptic schema is applied on a macro-level of the social body as “its vocation was to become a generalized function” (Foucault, 1977a: 207). The main influence of the Panopticon on Foucault’s work is to highlight the importance of constant surveillance. Surveillance, which relates to gaze, suggests that “visibility is a trap” (Foucault, 1977a: 200) and individuals alter their behaviour accordingly. Foucault (1977a) justifies his application of surveillance theory as proving the perpetual ‘functioning of power’. In this way, he puts emphasis on the role of gaze, visibility and surveillance in controlling individuals’ behaviour. In his words:

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself (Foucault, 1980:155).

Thus, Foucault’s (1977a) notion of Panopticism reflects his observation that constant surveillance creates a culture where individuals, in continuous anticipation of being monitored and judged, turn their gaze onto themselves and self-monitor and self-discipline according to the prevailing order (Tischner and Malson, 2008). Applying Foucault’s notion of surveillance, we understand that people behave and act as if they were under constant monitoring and surveillance. This surveillance stems from and is exercised upon societies. Foucault’s (1977a) illustration of surveillance in schools, hospitals, the military and other social institutions exemplifies the roles of society where surveillance functions. His example of schools and students’ obedience to school rules is an illustration of surveillance. Students follow school rules constantly, even though they cannot verify the existence of that surveillance.

According to Foucault, individuals under surveillance “must never know whether [they are] being looked at, at any one moment; but they must be sure that they may always be so” (1977a: 201). Again, similar to Bourdieu’s symbolic power, surveillance as a tool of disciplinary power cannot function without the consent of individuals (Foucault, 1977a). This means that surveillance shifts from an external form to an internal disposition. When individuals are exposed to external surveillance, they apply self-surveillance and self-assessment to regulate their own behaviour. Surveillance has been proven to be a great contributor in individuals participating in “disciplinary practice to
maintain an ideal weight” (Johns and Johns, 2000: 227). In other words, feeling oneself to be in a state of constant surveillance leads to the state of self-surveillance, seeking perfection and security for our bodies (Bordo, 2003). Women’s feelings of insecurity about their bodies are initiated by what culture teaches them. This way, the culture functions as surveillance and controls women in the way they evaluate their bodies and appearance.

For many scholars, Foucault fails to analyse the differences between the experiences of each gender. As long as panoptic surveillance is part of everyday life, there will be some sort of difference between men’s and women’s experiences of it. Of course, surveillance is not solely limited to a specific gender; rather it occurs among both genders differently. Mulac et al. (1987) emphasised the distinction between surveillance amongst the two genders, looking particular at the density of gaze between females compared to men, and whether this gaze was accompanied by verbal or nonverbal actions. Mainly, they aimed to find out the difference in the behaviour of their participants according to gaze and divided them into three categories: male/male, female/female and male/female. Mulac et al. (1987) found that the group with the highest mutual gaze rate, whether with verbal or nonverbal actions, was female/female.

The feeling of being watched is the reason why people in certain societies act and behave in particular ways (Giovanelli and Ostertage, 2009). Individuals become their own observer. Here, I argue, this kind of surveillance operates as a ‘judgement’ within society that evaluates people based on their body and appearance. Women in particular feel that they are being observed and judged by others in a modern judgemental society. It is crucial here to highlight the dynamic of a judgement look and to know who is judging whom. This tells us, from a Foucauldian perspective, who is superior and which criteria they own to position themselves as such, and who lacks these criteria, locating them in a lower position in the social hierarchy and thus inferior and subject to judgement. Vaz and Bruno (2003) clarify this point based on different social levels. They claim that people who judge should be at the same level of social hierarchy or superior to those who are being judged. This shows how power relations operate among individuals and within their interactions. From that point, women try to apply self-surveillance, monitor their behaviour and manage their bodies and appearances.

Foucault suggests that power is practised upon bodies through surveillance, disciplinary practices and thus power is everywhere. Bourdieu (1991) offered his concept of symbolic power as an element that shapes individuals’ behaviour. Bourdieu views
power as ‘subordinate power’ that can be accumulated or lost (Gečienė, 2002). The following section discusses Bourdieu’s idea of symbolic power to demonstrate how power is operated over women and thus moulds their behaviours and bodily practices.

### 2.5.2 Symbolic power and the social body

Foucault’s analysis of power relations holds that power has to be ‘active’ and practised systematically by one individual or a group over another (Cronin, 1996). This way, individuals regulate their own behaviour by accepting this control and disciplining themselves. This resonates with Bourdieu’s notion of *symbolic power*. Bourdieu defines symbolic power as “a form of power that is exerted on bodies directly and as if by magic, without any physical constraint; but this magic works only on the basis of the dispositions deposited … at the deepest level of the body” (2001: 38). Bourdieu introduces his concept of power as symbolic and invisible. He thereby depicts power as a system of symbols that regulate individuals’ behaviour.

Similar to Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power, symbolic power for Bourdieu is practised on bodies, though it is not a physical force or constraint. Symbolic power, as a ‘magic’ sort of power, functions by embedding itself in people’s dispositions and embodiment actions. Hence, the main way for symbolic power to be exercised over individuals is through the internalisation and legitimisation of a familiarised disposition to the physical world as a taken for granted truth that dominates individuals’ lives (Bourdieu, 2001). Therefore, symbolic power is connected to and part of individuals’ habitus – dispositions. Bourdieu views symbolic power as “the imposition of systems of symbolisms and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate” (Jenkins, 1992: 104).

In that sense, daily emotions, how individuals feel about themselves and what sort of experiences they have are strongly attached to symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2001). This gives the notions of symbolic power and power relations vital importance in how women define their subjectivities and participate with weight management practices. In Bourdieu’s work (2001) *Masculine Domination*, he emphasises women’s subordination to male domination across many cultures. For instance, he mentioned women’s self-
depreciation in Kabyle as being reflected in their regard for their “genitals as something deficient, ugly, even repulsive” (Bourdieu, 2001: 35). This classification is seen as an embodiment of symbolic power where women’s own body image is derived from thinking about the relationship with their husbands.

Symbolic power is “a subordinate power … legitimated form of … power” (Bourdieu, 1991: 170). Moreover, Bourdieu affirms that relations among individuals serve as a channel to exercise power. Hence, the key factor for power to operate is the “relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it” (Bourdieu, 1991: 170). Cerroni and Simonella argue that “symbolic violence is based on the idea of dominance without discipline” whereby women develop a disposition to consent to men’s domination (2012: 169 emphasis in original). In a Foucauldian sense, individuals internalise and consent to the power that is given to the dominator. In that sense, our daily life norms that are taken-for-granted and function as truth or a frame that regulates our behaviour within our societies. Furthermore, symbolic power is “the form material power relations assume when they are perceived through social categories that represent them as legitimate” (Cronin, 1996: 65).

Foucault’s disciplinary power and Bourdieu’s symbolic power both emphasise the acceptance by subjects in order to operate. The disciplinary power that exists within power relations is “exercised with the tacit consent of those over whom it is exercised” (Gečienė, 2002: 57). Bourdieu’s symbolic power similarly entails “general acceptance of such relations” (Cronin, 1996: 65).

In this project, Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power could help in discerning the different dynamics and justifications for women’s involvement in weight management practices within the Saudi Arabian context. It helps to shed light on the dominant powers within a patriarchal society such as Saudi Arabia. This is because symbolic violence exists in everyday life in a way that legitimates the domination of certain groups or individuals over others (Grzyb, 2016). Hence, symbolic power instils itself in individuals’ minds and shapes the way they see, classify and judge the world. Jenkins (1992: 104) described symbolic power as:

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1 The Algerian tribe that Bourdieu lived with and on whom he conducted his ethnographic research.
The imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon 
groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimized. 
This legitimacy obscures the power relations which permit that 
imposition to be successful.

In light of symbolic power, Grzyb (2016) confirms that women within patriarchal 
societies are poles of symbolic power. She argues that women are a “disadvantaged group 
themselves” (Grzyb, 2016: 1024) who submit to and legitimise men’s power over them. 
By accepting that situation, women inadvertently respond to and close the circle for 
symbolic violence to operate. This process is taken for granted by women. In Grzyb’s 
(2016) argument, she bears out that women upholding men’s demands and power locates 
them as ‘active’ agents in power relations.

Bourdieu (2001) argues that in modern societies, it is impossible to avoid 
symbolic power, as it is “embedded in the body in the form of dispositions” (Bourdieu, 
2001: 39). This is why, similar to Foucault, all human relationships are saturated with 
power and thus power relations. Moreover, all human feelings, actions and behaviour are 
the outcomes of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2001). While Foucault considers disciplinary 
practices to be an outcome of disciplinary power, Bourdieu (2001: 40) points out that 
women choose to submit to symbolic power in ‘submissive practices’ whereby women 
become “their own worst enemies”. In that sense, women develop “‘submissive’ 
dispositions” that contribute to the construction of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2001). As 
a sort of symbolic power, women submit to their husbands’ domination and take it for 
granted as the natural norm (Sanli, 2011). Individuals internalise social norms as truth 
and behave accordingly. Bourdieu (1991) confirms that symbolic power is constituted 
through ‘utterances’, which is the discursive formation in a Foucauldian sense. Thus, 
symbolic power can be found in individuals’ comments and discussions. On the other 
hand, Foucault (1977a) claims that power is exercised on individuals through 
surveillance. The following section discusses this.

2.5.3 Docile body: The ‘malleability’ of the social body

Women’s social body, as a cultural product, has a history of culture and practices 
that are played out and inscribed upon it (Taylor, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial to 
understand the social body and its everyday practices within a cultural and social context 
because “it is impossible adequately to understand women’s problem with food and body 
image unless these significations are unpacked, and this requires examining slenderness
in multiple contexts” (Bordo, 2003: 26). These practices are mainly linked to the body so as to shape the body in accordance to cultural demands and standards. Therefore, a body is perceived as “an object that must be controlled or it will control” (Orbach, 2005: 129).

The ability to control and manage our own bodies gives it a special importance in that we cannot control other aspects of our social life as we do with our bodies (Howson, 2004). This gives the individual the feeling of being in command of their own body. For example, we cannot control politics, our class or our social relationships, but we can have an impact on how people treat us based on our appearance by controlling our bodies, what we eat and how much we exercise (Howson, 2004). Female bodies become docile as a result of external rules and regulations that apply power over the bodies (Bordo, 2003). Bordo suggests that Foucault's concept of the ‘docile body’ entails that the body is “regulated by the norms of cultural life” (Bordo, 2003: 165). This suggests that we can understand culture and society by understanding the social body.

A body is not limited to being a biological static entity; rather it is a social product that can be “commanded and disciplined” (Hancock et al., 2000: 2). Alongside his theory of power, surveillance and judgement, Foucault introduced the notion of docile bodies. As power is applied over the social body, it becomes an “object of such imperious and pressing investments” (Foucault, 1977a: 136). He adopts the view that the social body is highly malleable and not static; thus it obeys social orders and judgement (Foucault, 1988). As long as the body is a product of discursive formations which change over time, Foucault argues that the social body is docile and malleable. In his words, the docile body is “the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces … [also the body] that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, 1977a: 136).

A docile body responds to changes in discursive formation, which are the rules of normalisation in society. Normalization, for Foucault, is to define what is normal and what is not within a particular society. Foucault views that docile bodies, which entail self-regulation, were ‘made’ to meet the normalisation formed by social discourses (Ramazanoglu, 2002). Bordo (2003) argues that a woman’s body is subjected to society’s demands and changes, which is normalisation in a Foucauldian sense. Thus, a woman is constantly pursuing ideals, seeking to be normal. To achieve these ever-changing feminine ideals, each woman improves her body using various techniques so her body becomes docile. In other words, women work on their bodies according to the change in social demands and ideals. Consumer culture researchers, theorise the docile body as an
outcome of both social control and self-management (Cronin et al., 2015). In that sense, the docile body can be constructed as “the Market” and “the Object” which receives material pressure of the available options in the market (Cronin et al., 2015: 1915). These available options play a role in (re)forming individuals’ food consumption behaviour.

2.5.4 Technologies of the self

As part of body docility, individuals’ bodies become projects to be worked upon. Perceiving the body as a project entails working on it to modify and improve it (Hancock et al., 2000). Individuals are preoccupied with their bodies and appearance in order to meet the social standards by which they construct their subjectivities (Shilling, 2012). Therefore, individuals are active in managing their bodies and applying various body management practices to control their body appearance (Shilling, 2012). This preoccupation with the body within contemporary societies takes forms such as dieting, exercise and cosmetic surgery (Hancock et al., 2000), which are the practices of consumers’ daily lives. These practices constitute a large proportion of the health and beauty industry. In order to make sense of the marketplace of the weight management industry, we need to understand the individuals’ applications of these practices as technologies of the self which consequently contribute to the consumption of these products (Cronin et al., 2015).

Because our bodies are docile, Foucault claims that we can control and manipulate our own bodies, yet are being controlled by others. Illustrating the concept, Foucault (1988) argues that ‘technologies of the self’ means that individuals apply different technologies on themselves in order to construct or reconstruct their identities. In other words, individuals respond to power by applying technologies of the self in order to reach a balanced point where they feel happy and satisfied. Foucault defines technologies of the self as technologies that:

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (1988: 18).

As long as power, which can be represented by technologies of the self, is productive and positive (McNay, 1992), women apply these practices to improve and regulate themselves through their bodies. Cronin et al. (2014a) affirm that consumers
monitor themselves and control their consumption behaviour through Foucault’s concept of ‘technologies of the self’. Applying various technologies to re/form the body and be beautiful is part of constructing one’s ‘beautiful self’ (Featherstone, 2010). This raises the point of this research where I am looking at the self based on bodily experiences related to women’s body weight. Self-regulation practices or disciplining practices or technologies of the self are many, such as dieting, exercise, cosmetic surgery, make-up and other grooming and cosmetic practices. Seid (1989) listed some strategies that women tended to apply at that time to control their bodies and achieve desirable thinness. For example, she mentioned “pills, fasts, formulas, bizarre food combinations, psychotherapy” (Seid, 1989: 3) as various ways to control body weight.

We can see technologies of the self when individuals apply any practice with a specific aim that affects their feelings. For instance, dieting or exercise are technologies which women apply to control their bodies and thus their feelings about themselves. Chapman (1997: 208) argues that technologies of the self refer to the “process by which people relate to, understand, create, and transform their selves”. In that sense, analysing the technologies that women apply to control their bodies will illustrate the factors that contribute to their subjectivities. The notion of technologies of the self enables me, as a researcher, to make sense of how women construct their experiences as independent individuals in their daily lives (McNay, 1994). To illustrate, disciplinary power through technologies of the self does not try to violently oppress women’s bodies. Rather technologies are powerful in controlling women’s docile bodies (Sawicki, 1991). They generate and direct women’s control over their bodies in order to improve their bodies and subjectivities. In other words, technologies of the self contribute to the sensation produced when women apply weight management practices.

Dworkin (1974) argues that women, either intentionally or not, engage in self-care practices such as make-up, body hair removal, dying their hair, dieting and so on, in order to meet social norms and gain social acceptance. They manipulate all parts of their bodies and work on disciplining them, spending time, money and effort to look beautiful (Dworkin, 1974). This claim resonates with Foucault’s notion of the docile body. In agreement with Dworkin, I argue that whether women participate in these practices or not, they still have an appreciation of them, as they see them as taken-for-granted feminine practices that every woman should do. That argument could contribute to other aspects of women’s subjectivity and also influence their body dissatisfaction, as discussed in the body image section above. Jagger affirms that “dissatisfaction becomes
an energizing process – the motivation for women to engage with their bodies as an object for work, for ‘doing femininity’” (2000: 56).

Muth and Cash (1997) refer to the techniques that women apply to manage their body as ‘body image investment’. Women invest in their own body by using different technologies in order to improve their physical appearance. McKie et al. (1993) confirm that dieting is one of the most effective and powerful technologies women apply to manage their weight. In this research, I investigate the technologies of the self that women apply to manage and control their bodies. For instance, the literature suggests that dieting and exercise are technologies of controlling the body which have contemporarily become connected with femininity (Bordo, 2003).

Bordo (2003) argues that in modern societies, women’s preoccupation with body and weight issues is a normal and common orientation. She draws heavily on Foucault’s account of power, the docile body and technologies of the self to analyse women’s involvement in weight and appearance management. Women are preoccupied with fitness, dieting, and weight issues constantly, until they become part of their subjectivities (Bordo, 2003). Bordo (2003) bears out that daily preoccupation with weight issues and the application of various strategies to control the body are seen as technologies of the self because they aim to improve and transform the self. Bordo (2003: 186) states:

Preoccupation… functions as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining "docile bodies" sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of these norms.

Bordo (2003) thus confirms that women’s bodies are docile and malleable and can be managed by technologies of the self. When women’s bodies respond to changing cultural demands and norms, they become docile. Accordingly, women monitor their bodies and see if they accord with social demands. Once they find incompatibility between their current bodies and social norms, they seek to improve their bodies in response to the change in cultural norms. This transformation to the body is carried out through the application of technologies of the self, which women use in order to feel better about themselves. As women use different technologies to control and manage their bodies in order to fit cultural beauty ideals, they expend much effort and time on their bodies to achieve or maintain slimness through dieting, exercise, pills or surgery (Seid, 1989). These disciplinary practices are considered feminine practices that help women to
emphasise their sexual appearance by controlling their body weight and shape (Sawicki, 1991).

Turner (1991) discusses the historical emergence of dieting as a self-regulation technique across religions and medical contexts. The notion of dieting, that is controlling one’s food intake, as a practice to discipline the body is not contemporary; rather it was used centuries ago in religious or medical rituals. In contemporary societies, the purpose of disciplining the body by controlling food intake has moved from religious and medical reasons to social reasons. People in modern times diet to manage their body weight and appearance, and thus to control the way they feel about themselves. Investigating this contemporary application of dieting in addition to exercise, as Turner (1991) suggests, can reveal a rationale for individuals’ behaviour as regards these practices. Women diet because they want to free themselves from social constraints and become more socially acceptable and appreciated (Markula, 1995).

Conversely, Chapman sees these technologies of weight control as “women’s disempowerment” (1997: 207). In her argument, Chapman (1997) posits that women are preoccupied with their bodies, expending time and effort to control them through various strategies. Apparently, women think that they have the option to choose whatever practices they want to control their bodies, and thus that they are in command of their bodies. These technologies offer them self-improvement, health and happiness. Their choice and application of a particular technology is interpreted as self-liberation and a “practice of freedom” (Chapman, 1997: 208). However, it is the opposite because it is undertaken in obedience and submission to social rules and cultural norms. Feminists argue that women tend to control their bodies by applying different techniques, such as undergoing cosmetic surgeries, which are nothing more than ‘repression’ (Askegaard et al., 2002). For this reason, it becomes women’s disempowerment rather than empowerment (Chapman, 1997). This claim is contrary to Foucault’s notion of power where he argues that disciplinary practices are tools of practicing power.

As dieting is basically regulating food intake, McKie et al. (1993) emphasise the role of food in constructing women’s body image and thus their subjectivity. Likewise, Hesse-Biber (1996) views food as a cultural practice which overlaps with women’s attempts to control their bodies. She justifies her claim that food rituals are a daily practice directly influencing the body’s appearance. Thus, women diet to control their food intake in an attempt to control their appearance. Exercising is another technology women apply to improve their appearance. This is one of the most prominent strategies that women
employ to regulate their bodies. The gym, as a site that contributes to producing a fit, toned and slim body, has become a prominent place to achieve the desired figure (Sassatelli, 1999). Chapman also argues that “through routines of healthy eating, exercise and self-monitoring, women can make themselves look good and feel good about themselves” (1997: 219).

Johns and Johns (2000) draw on Foucault’s theory of technologies of the self. They classify dieting as a technology of the self that contributes to athletes’ self-transformation. They confirm that elite athletes use dieting as a form of technology of the self to manage their body weight and to feel good in preparation for competitions. Dieting, as a technology of the self, is more obvious and powerful among female athletes than males (Johns and Johns, 2000). They connect this to the greater tendency towards eating disorders amongst females compared to males. Moreover, women rely on dieting and exercise more than plastic surgery to control their weight and appearance.

Surely, food is directly related to the body and it affects the body either internally (health-wise) or externally (the appearance). According to McKie et al. (1993), there is a strong link between food and women’s body image. Hence, food as part of their social life influences women to participate in weight management practices. This is because women use food as an instrument to achieve the desired body while health issues are a secondary concern. Here, food works as an element that plays a role in forming women’s relationships with their bodies and consequently their body image.

Cronin et al. (2015) add another dimension to the role of food in constructing one’s subjectivity. Food as part of lifestyle can determine individuals’ health conditions. Cronin et al. (2015) claim that individuals’ illnesses have not only physical and psychological impact on the person. Rather, they are related to society’s judgement and perception of the individual; and thus determining their social position. To gain social appreciation, individuals are always keen to be within social norms and rules which make them feel better about themselves. As long as technologies of the self are mainly about one’s feelings about themselves, managing health through food controlling is considered as application of technologies of the self (Cronin et al., 2015).

Moreover, many chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, high blood pressure or obesity, are mainly nutrition-related conditions (McKie et al., 1993). In other words, food consumption is a matter that is directly linked with health issues.

Again, food is part of every culture and the process of socialisation in that culture. The importance of food as part of an individual’s social life cannot be denied. As I will
discuss in the empirical chapters, food is considered the hub of socialisation within Saudi Arabian society. Its prominent role in social life influences people. Therefore, I will investigate how food affects and influences women’s bodies, body image and thus their participation in different weight management practices.

In parallel with technologies of the self, habitus is another concept that functions as a tool to understand individuals’ experiences and behaviour. Cronin et al. (2014a) assert that Foucault’s concept of technologies of the self and Bourdieu’s concept of habitus are together widely applied in consumer research in order to gain comprehensive understanding of daily life practices and consumption. They demonstrate a clear example of the compatibility of these two concepts in understanding consumer behaviour, in particular practices related to the body and subjectivity.

2.6 Habitus and ‘practical sense’

2.6.1 What is habitus?

The word habitus originates from a Latin word meaning “habitual or typical conditions, or state or appearance particularly of the body” (Jenkins, 1992: 74). Initially, Bourdieu was influenced by Mauss’s (1979) research on how individuals in different societies use their bodies differently (Crossley, 2004). Moreover, the formulation of this concept was influenced by Durkheim (1977), who looked at how our current practices and actions are the unconscious results of our experiences in the past that we are not aware of, and thus have impact that contributed to construct our personality. Due to the fundamentality of the concept of habitus in understanding individuals’ behaviour, it is one of the most prominent concepts of Pierre Bourdieu’s work in sociology, and has thus been widely adopted by sociologists. Bourdieu defines habitus as a:

system of durable, transposable dispositions … principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends (1989: 53).

For Bourdieu, the concept of history that interests him is “the taken-for-granted, axiomatic necessity of objective reality” (1992: 80). Individuals act in a certain way without thinking or questioning why they do things in one particular way rather than another. Habitus encompasses the “natural world” that is seen as truth for individuals
(Bourdieu, 1977). Indeed, our past experiences, inscribed in our minds, constitute our history and are embedded within our behaviours, minds and bodies (Bourdieu, 1993). This indicates that habitus is our embodied history, ‘forgotten as history’ yet operating in the present (Bourdieu, 1989), that functions as a set of themes and classifications in our mind which affects our current and future actions and choices. Therefore, habitus is a connecting point between an individual’s past, present and future. It is formed by past experiences and functions on present feelings, behaviours and practices, and future expectations. Cronin et al. (2014a) define habitus as “implying habit in choices and behaviours, one’s habitus functions beneath the levels of rationality and consciousness, orienting consumption by providing one with a code of how to act and respond throughout everyday life” (Cronin et al., 2014a:1562). That is, it is ‘structured’ by childhood and educational experiences while ‘structuring’ individuals’ current and future practices (Maton, 2012: 51). Past experiences are a key point for habitus. For any individual, childhood is the first building brick of their past and thus has a great impact on their experiences in the present and future. Habitus, which is based on history, produces individuals’ practices within their societies by applying their past experiences without their realising it. From an early age we are learning to do things; thus we take our decisions and actions for granted without thinking about our presumptions in doing them, as they are a product of material conditions. Habitus explains individual behaviour that seems to be ‘natural’ (Jagger, 2000).

Jenkins argues that “practices are the product of habitus, as well as serving to reproduce it or confirm it as ‘true’” (Jenkins, 1992: 80). This means that there is a mutual relationship between habitus and material conditions in forming practices. Throughout our lives, using our different experiences, we unconsciously build our habitus. This means that individuals’ practices are formed unconsciously, and consequently their behaviour is taken for granted. Our daily life experiences from an early age are built, accumulated and embedded in our minds (Bourdieu, 1989). Thus, our practices cannot be detached from time and space, rather they operate within them (Jenkins, 1992). This means the habitus is constituted by the conditions of existence in which we grew up and in which we develop long-lasting dispositions.

The dispositions embedded in habitus motivate our practices. Past social experiences and practices constitute dispositions. Because habitus is a system of durable dispositions, our dispositions are formed beginning in childhood and our early life experiences (Jenkins, 1992). Disposition is an important element that forms habitus,
which is the main “generative basis’ for practice” (Jenkins, 1992: 78). In that sense, Bourdieu classifies disposition into two bases, conscious and unconscious, both of which affect individuals’ behaviour (Jenkins, 1992). Bourdieu stated:

> Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning … It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know (Bourdieu, 1977: 79).

Rational behaviour as decision-making or unintentional behaviours are all linked to disposition (Jenkins, 1992). Hence, dispositions shape both conscious and unconscious practice. Nonetheless, practice is not straightforward behaviour; there are many interwoven elements by which practice is produced. “Practices are produced in and by habitus and its dispositions … and … the social field” (Jenkins, 1992: 78).

Bourdieu (1990) describes individuals’ behaviour as a ‘feel for the game’. He likens social life to a game and the rules are social rules. People internalise social and cultural norms, which become set in their minds as taken-for-granted reality. Thus, whenever they are in their field – the arena they are in – they act according to the game rules without pre-thinking, as the social norms are already inscribed in their minds. This subjective sense of the game enables the individual to operate within the field and control their actions (Bourdieu, 1989). That is to say, individuals’ actions “can be directed towards certain ends without being consciously directed to these ends” (Bourdieu, 1990: 10). Learning the rules of the game occurs gradually beginning with childhood experiences. In that sense, this ‘automatic’ disposition to behave in a certain manner works as a link between individuals’ inscribed history – habitus – and their material worlds – field – in a way that makes future practices predictable (Bourdieu, 1989).

### 2.6.2 Malleability of habitus

Habitus is an acquired disposition that has been held by individuals for a long period of time, yet it is also amendable depending on the social situation the individual encounters (Wacquant, 2014). Looking at Bourdieu’s definition of habitus, he confirms that the acquired disposition is not fixed; rather it is durable for a long period of time. Habitus is changeable and adjustable in accordance with changes in circumstance over a long period of time (Bourdieu, 1989; Navarro, 2006). Habitus is basically the history of our learning process and experiences through social life and is continuous and dynamic. Hence, our habitus is “objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is
constituted” (Bourdieu, 1977: 95). In our daily lives, we learn new things, go through new experiences and solve new problems. According to changes in the conditions of existence, individuals amend their habitus to cope with new circumstances they encounter. Thus, over time recent events modify and adjust our dispositions. In that vein, habitus is not totally static, rather it is a long-term disposition that can be adjusted. In Bourdieu’s words:

Habitus changes constantly in response to new experiences. Dispositions are subject to a kind of permanent revision, but one which is never radical, because it works on the basis of premises established in the previous state. They are characterized by a combination of constancy and variation which varies according to the individual and his degree of flexibility or rigidity (2000:161).

In Bourdieu’s words, “people’s wills adjust to their possibilities, their desires and the capacity to satisfy them” (2003: 76). Whenever individuals encounter new conditions of existence, they unconsciously adjust their habitus to fit within those. Depending on the change in circumstances, individuals adjust their habitus to fit new situations “in advance to the demand of the field” (Bourdieu, 1993: 76). This way, habitus functions as a tool to help individuals adapt to new circumstances (Bourdieu, 1977). This means that the individual – with one habitus – can have different behaviours or actions depending on the circumstances of the current social field, which leads one to change one’s expectations (Jenkins, 1992). Thus, habitus is “the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (Bourdieu, 1977: 72).

2.6.3 Habitus and practice

For Bourdieu, habitus which is “constituted in the course of individual history” (Bourdieu, 1989: 57), is intangible, as it is located within individuals’ minds and cannot be pinpointed exactly; however, it is manifested by individuals’ practices, tendencies and disposition. It works as a factor influencing individuals’ unthinkable responses and actions. Indeed, habitus does not function alone in forming individual practices; it operates in cooperation with other elements, namely capital and field. Individuals’ practices are not simply reactions to a certain motive; rather, they are the embodiment of the history embedded in our minds and bodies. Aiming to understand the overlapping relationship between the social field and individuals’ habitus in forming their subjectivity, Bourdieu crafted a clear formula that illuminates the nature of each of the
components that in the end shape the individual and his/her actions: [(Habitus) (capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu, 2010a: 95). This formula reveals the mechanism of practice through its main components, habitus, capital and field. Each of these elements is defined below. Individuals' practice is an outcome of the overlapping or interaction between them.

First, as discussed previously, habitus “engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions” (Bourdieu, 1977: 95) that contribute to individuals’ classification and appreciation of their social world. It also forms the basis of individuals’ dispositions and practices as well as their perceptions of these practices (Bourdieu, 2010a). Second, capital is a vital principle that has an influence on practice. Bourdieu proffers several forms of capital that individuals acquire: “‘economic capital’ (i.e. material wealth and forms of money); … ‘cultural capital’ (i.e. knowledge and skills); … ‘symbolic capital’ (i.e. prestige or honour) (Bourdieu, 1991: 14); and ‘social capital’ (the position of a given agent in the social space)” (Bourdieu, 1991: 230). Individuals, with their acquired volumes of different types of capital and their disposition, operate in the field. Bourdieu described the field as “a structured system of social positions – occupied either by individuals or institutions – the nature of which defines the situations for their occupants” (Jenkins, 1992: 85). Fields are the arenas where individuals communicate, interact and behave to represent themselves. Each field functions as a game where individuals have to follow particular rules.

Bourdieu (1989) posited that habitus can be objectified into two modes, body and institution. Bodily habitus can be discerned through individuals’ bodily practices, such as controlling one’s weight, style of dressing and controlling one’s appearance, or other bodily postures and gestures. A history, Bourdieu argues, is a ‘collective history’ that is reproduced in individuals’ habitus. To make sense of an institution’s collective history, it should be translated into bodily habitus and thus practices.

Bourdieu gives special attention to the social body as a focal point of manifesting habitus (1989). This means that the way we embody our taken-for-granted beliefs, the way we classify and categorise things, the way we constitute our tastes and also the way we put these beliefs into action all operate through the body. According to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, all manners that reflect habitus basically revolve around the social body and its social function. All of our bodily movements – our gestures, the way we dress, the choices we make – are all built upon our habitus. Bourdieu emphasises the roles of
the physical body as embodiment of the habitus. Therefore, habitus cannot operate separately from an individual’s body.

For the social body to operate within social life, Bourdieu introduces the concept of *bodily hexis*. The aim of correlating habitus with the concept of *bodily hexis* is to convey the importance of an individual’s body in reflecting habitus (Jenkins, 1992) and how individuals physically act without pre-thinking. *Bodily hexis* also links individuals’ subjectivity with their cultural world (ibid). Bourdieu describes *bodily hexis* as:

> political mythology realized, ‘em-bodied’, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking (Bourdieu, 1989: 69-70 emphasis in original).

Since habitus is “an ongoing set of likely outcomes … (practices)” (Jenkins, 1992: 80), investigating it enables an understanding of how individuals’ practices within society are formed (Chandler, 2013). Moreover, Wacquant emphasises that investigating habitus helps explain how society is inscribed within individuals by grasping “the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality” (2005: 318), which is manifested in their behaviour and practices. This means that individuals live in certain material conditions of existence which they internalise and process, and which then influence their behaviour, actions and choices. Individuals apply their internal habitus to give meaning to their practices and dispositions, which consequently construct their lifestyle (Bourdieu, 2010a). Our current perception of a structure is a reflection of the images we have in our minds, rooted in our past, which are embodied in our habitus (Rothenberg, 2010). Our unconscious saves past experiences and gives current and future experiences meaning accordingly (ibid).

McLeod (2005) approaches Bourdieu’s theory of habitus and the social field from a feminist perspective. She finds that sociologists often use the concepts of habitus, agent, identity and subjectivity as synonyms. She argues that the concept of habitus, in particular, is the most suitable concept to explain the implicit facts underpinning individuals’ practices. Habitus basically describes the mechanism of how individuals “become themselves … and … engage in practices” (Webb et al., 2002: xii).

Exploring individuals’ habitus will enable me to understand how women engage in different practices to control their bodies. It is also helpful in understanding women’s weight management activities as a part of their daily lives and their subjectivities. Naturally, people differ regarding their own personal values, and these variations affect
their daily lives, interests and consumption patterns (O'Mahony and Hall, 2007). These values are embedded in habitus and disposition.

For instance, if women appreciate physical appearance, body image and a thin body, they would unconsciously apply their disposition to reflect this value. That is to say, we can see different practices, choices and classifications among individuals because they have different sets of dispositions that constitute their habitus. For instance, if two individuals have similar practices, it does not mean they have an identical habitus; rather, they have different sets of habitus and a different volume of capital that results in this practice. Individuals have different conditions of existence; thus, they each have a different habitus. All of our body gestures, postures and dispositions are basically embodiments of a history of experiences in our minds that became translated into actions and choices (Bourdieu, 1993). The traces of these experiences acquired within our existence can then be reflected in our later life behaviour, decisions and practices.

2.7 Family habitus: Mothers and daughters

Naturally, individuals cannot exist independently from others, they live in social institutions, as families, within social fields, and this entails interaction. The family is the smallest social institution unit that constitutes the wider society. Therefore, the family is not isolated from society; rather, it is constituted within it and resembles its culture and norms (De Beauvoir, 1968). In his work On the Family as a Realized Category (Bourdieu, 1996), Bourdieu gives special attention to family as a basis for all his other concepts, including capital and habitus. He defines the family as “a set of related individuals linked either by alliance (marriage) or affiliation … and living under the same roof (cohabitation)” (Bourdieu, 1996: 19). Hence, a family is a group of individuals living in the same property and having in common conditions of existence such as education, culture, income and rituals (Bourdieu, 1996).

As discussed earlier, we accumulate past experiences in our unconscious, then act accordingly. Growing up in specific family conditions produces different individuals, though they share the same family habitus. Indeed, Bourdieu (1996) sees each family as a unique entity. This is because behind closed doors lies a secret that maintains their intimacy and privacy from the external world. Within their household, a family perpetuates itself among its members (Bourdieu, 1996). Therefore, there is a mutual and
dynamic relationship between the family members which affects the way in which individuals form themselves and develop their habitus (McLeod, 2005).

Bourdieu describes “the house as a stable enduring locus and the household as a permanent unit, durably associated with a house that is endlessly transmissible” (1996: 20). In that sense, each family has their own identity, which distinguishes them from other families. Furthermore, their habitus, dispositions and capitals are transmitted through generations. Therefore, family members have a common sense of the world and a similar way of classifying and perceiving the world (Bourdieu, 1996).

Bourdieu’s argument about family as a social institution justifies the importance of the mother-daughter relationship, as they are members of the same family. The mother and daughter relationship is one of the most important and strongest relationships among women. It starts from birth and each influences the other. As mentioned previously, Bourdieu defines habitus as “a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history” (Bourdieu, 1989: 54). Individuals’ habitus and the way they form their disposition are constituted through their interactions, socialisation and acculturation within social groups to produce individual and collective practices.

Despite his emphasis on how vital family habitus is in shaping individual habitus, Bourdieu (1989) did not refer to ‘family habitus’ per se, rather he implicitly embedded this notion in the concept of shared habitus or dispositions of a class or group (Bourdieu, 1989). In Bourdieu’s words, group – or family – habitus is a:

subjective but non-individual system of internalized structures, common schemes of perception, conception and action … and the objective co-ordination of practices and the sharing of the world view could be founded on the perfect impersonality and interchangeability of singular practices and views (1989: 60).

As long as the family is a group of individuals in a specific set of circumstances, I use the concept ‘family habitus’ here to reflect shared dispositions and capitals in the Bourdieusian sense. For instance, a child who was born into a family that appreciates football will tend to develop a disposition towards football in particular rather than other types of sports. Generally, when people come from similar social backgrounds, they share a ‘similar logic of practice’ (Grenfell, 2010).

The ‘family habitus’ term has been used previously by many sociologists to overcome the fact that Bourdieu did not specify a particular group habitus as such
(Tomanović, 2004; Atkinson, 2011; Archer et al., 2012; Burke et al., 2013). For example, Grenfell (2010) highlights the family role in forming individuals’ dispositions and practices from a Bourdieusian perspective. He proposed that the concept of family habitus or domestic habitus stems from the notion of habitus. The term ‘family habitus’ is used to designate the habitus that forms within the family, emphasising the primary and initial role of the family habitus in constituting individual habitus and thus practice. In spite of the pervasive application of the habitus notion in many social studies, the concept of family habitus is still under development and less prevalent in social studies than the more general concept of habitus (DeLuca, 2016).

Inspired by Bourdieu, Atkinson (2011) has done interesting research on the concept of family habitus and its influence on children’s education. His work has influenced other sociologists with respect to the concept of family habitus. Burke et al. (2013) apply Atkinson’s concept of familial habitus more broadly. They approach ‘collective habitus’ as a socio-analytic instrument for understanding the “impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual’s behaviour as it is mediated through … family” (Burke et al., 2013: 165). This means that individuals’ habitus is not detached from their family, but rather is interrelated. They claim that social institutions such as the family have a direct effect on the way individuals form their habitus and thus practice. They maintain that this sort of influence can produce collective practices which are mediated by family habitus. DeLuca (2016) agrees with Atkinson’s (2011) ideas about collective practice and habitus, stressing the role of the family in the reproduction of social conditions that govern members’ dispositions and practices.

DeLuca (2016) extended the notion of habitus to include family habitus as a concept in her ethnographic study on family members who join swimming and tennis clubs. Swartz (2002) mentioned a good example of how children are influenced by their family’s habitus. He states that children of athletic families are more likely to appreciate sport and develop a disposition to become athletes; similarly, children of artistic families “acquire the know-how to interpret” and evaluate art work (Swartz, 2002: 63s).

In this vein, Tomanović (2004) found a direct link between children’s everyday lives and family habitus. Evidence was found that children of working class families whose parents’ social network was limited to neighbours and family are more likely to have a similar orientation towards spending their time with peers, family and in the neighbourhood. However, children who are born into professional families are more oriented towards public and institutional places and have a broader and more diverse
social network, like their family. In short, children reflected their families’ lifestyles and were significantly influenced by their family habitus and cultural preferences and choices. This can explain why individuals from one family tend to have common tastes, dispositions, actions and sets of classification, which differ from individuals in a different family.

This is not to suggest that individuals from the same family are indistinguishable, but rather that they broadly share ideas and ways of perceiving the world. In fact, Bourdieu (1989) claimed that no two individuals’ habitus could be identical, even if they came from the same class, group and family background. He argues that each individual has a ‘personal’ style that distinguishes them from others and reflects their tastes, practices and behaviour. However, what they can share is group habitus, where individuals are exposed to similar conditions of existence (Bourdieu, 1993).

Nevertheless, individuals who come from the same family have a ‘stylistic affinity’ that can classify them as belonging to that group and introduce them as “a metaphor of any of the others” (Bourdieu, 2010a: 168). Investigating the mother-daughter dyad in terms of family habitus can help me as researcher to understand this ‘stylistic affinity’ among each family and distinguish it from other families’ habitus. Through the emphasis on the importance of childhood experiences in forming an individual’s habitus, Bourdieu (1996) confirms the role of the family in structuring individuals’ lives, subjectivities and thus behaviour.

Despite the rationale underpinning the concept of family habitus, there are generational differences between mothers and daughters. In a Bourdieusian sense, these two generations differ because “an entirely different game is played in different ages” (Wittgenstein and Barrett, 1966: 8). This provides insight into how the change in culture and beauty ideals over time can change women’s feelings for the game as they adjust their dispositions and thus habitus. Therefore, different generations have faced different sorts of game rules that they have to follow to fit within their social field.

Applying this claim in this study means that the mothers had, in their youth, different beauty ideals to those of their daughters’ generation. Consequently, they operate differently within the social field. This suggests that there is a cultural and thus a generational shift within this society. Le Renard (2014) provides an example of generational differences in the Saudi Arabian context. She claims that it confirms that the mothers’ generation is more modest and conservative compared to their daughters, who
are more modern and open as they have more mobility and social interaction than their mothers (Le Renard, 2014).

One of the dimensions of this research is to understand women within a familial context. The most powerful and obvious female family relationship is that between mother and daughter. Maor argues that:

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\text{since mothers are the primary caregivers of children, and since mothers and daughters share the same gender, the latter often use their intimacy and acquaintance with their mothers’ bodies to learn about the significance of their bodies, and what it will be like when they grow up (2012: 102).}
\]

The mother-daughter relationship within the family has a special significance in forming the way women perceive themselves. In many studies, it has been proven that weight maintenance and body image for women are not totally autonomous in motivation. Rather, they are linked with the family’s conditions of existence and the individual’s early age experiences. Hesse-Biber (1996) emphasises the vital role of the family as an important social factor influencing women to achieve and maintain slim bodies. She suggests that these particular practices are strongly related to and influenced by the family. Maor (2012) conducted a study centred on how the mother-daughter relationship contributes to the daughter’s identity. She found that mothers have direct influence in forming a ‘fat identity’ for their daughters. This is because daughters hear constant negative comments from their mothers about being fat, which significantly affirms their identity as fat. Similarly, Cronin et al. found that “some mothers deflect their own figures with the slim frames – or body projects – of their daughters” (Cronin et al., 2014a: 1572) which again emphasises the importance of mother-daughter relationship in framing daughters subjectivities in relation to their bodies.

Looking at mothers and daughters as a family and analysing their family habitus will help to understand how mothers and daughters form their collective practices, and for this thesis in particular their experiences of weight management practices. Moreover, exploring individual habitus within the family will enable me to determine how this habitus forms part of women’s choices regarding weight management activities as a part of their daily life and their subjectivity. Subsequently, I will be able to examine the ways in which weight management practices are changing from self-help practices to a weight management institution in the Saudi Arabian context.
Studying family habitus can help the research in terms of how the family fosters individuals’ dispositions towards applying certain practices regarding their bodies. Moreover, it can help in discovering the common sense that mother and daughter share in interpreting the world and defining their subjectivities. In this thesis then, I position family habitus as a concept to show how social structures, and the family in particular, continue to shape, or constrain, the actions of individuals.

Specifically, I am investigating the practices related to women’s bodies which represent their habitus overall and thus illustrate their daily life experiences. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is a very useful tool for exploring how mother and daughter construct their subjectivities and thus practices within their familial context. Bourdieu put a great emphasis on the family as an independent unit that affects and influences its members’ subjectivity. This is because the family is the smallest unit or social group that individuals socialise within and thus forms their habitus.

In addition, this research investigates the feasibility of applying Bourdieu’s theory of family habitus in the Saudi Arabian context, which is quite different to the Western context where this theory has previously been applied. It has been proven, by applying Bourdieu’s theory in social studies, that each family has a unique habitus that distinguishes it from other families. Each family’s habitus can be discerned in different aspects such as dress, eating manners, etiquette, body size, and health manners.

Bourdieu’s notion of family habitus concurs with Foucault’s view of the family and society. In a Foucauldian sense, despite the family being a social unit that belongs to a given society, it is “a relatively autonomous unit which had its own logic and specific history” (McNay, 1992: 60). In other words, each family has its own rules, habits and rituals that distinguish it from other families within the same society. Moreover, the social location for each individual within the family can determine the power relations among that family. For instance, power relations can characterise the relationship between mother and daughter within their family. In a Bourdieusian sense, each family has its own habitus that makes it ‘relatively autonomous’ from other families.

2.8 Power and habitus

In this section, I justify applying this particular theoretical framework to my research. Foucault’s theory of power and power relations aims to analyse individuals’ actions and behaviour within discourse. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu offers an approach
that manifests the integration of the multiple factors which shape individuals’ behaviour in their daily lives, *habitus*. Therefore, bridging these two theories will help in analysing and comprehending the participants’ logic and motivations concerning their weight management practices.

Bourdieu asserted that habitus is “something powerfully generative” for individuals’ actions (1993: 87). Individuals act based on their acquired habitus and their dispositions. In other words, habitus is a mechanism of generating actions. Linking this idea with Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power as productive, I can find compatibility between them both. Both philosophers, Foucault and Bourdieu, discuss the social body and the factors that form it and related bodily behaviour. They both describe, in their respective theories, the generative power for individuals’ actions. Many sociologists have integrated both Foucault’s and Bourdieu’s concepts to investigate individuals’ social body and related behaviour. For instance, Bordo approached both theorists’ work on the social body and confirmed that they agree that the social body is “a *practical*, direct locus of social control” (2003: 165 emphasis in original).

For this research, examining power relations in addition to individuals’ habitus and family habitus will illuminate the ways in which women see and evaluate their bodies and appearance, and thus define their subjectivities. It also helps in understanding how other socio-cultural factors and power relations affect and shape their practices, and make sense of their participation in weight management practices. Foucault’s theory of power looks at how individuals are regulated consciously by different forms of power (McNay, 1992). Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, however, investigates how individuals constitute their subjectivities and thus their behaviour unconsciously based on their past experiences. Foucault claims that power cannot function outside of discourse, while Bourdieu confirms that habitus cannot operate detached from fields. Applying this theoretical framework will yield a comprehensive understanding of women’s weight management practices.

### 2.9 Summary

This chapter has laid out the position of women’s bodies within contemporary societies. It looked at bodies as culturally constituted; that is, formed and reformed by culture. First, I highlighted the process of development from seeing the human body as being only related to health and sickness to being a symbolic body that holds meaning,
culture and traditions. Then, I situated the body within consumer culture and how studying the social body has become a vital issue within consumer research. I also reviewed the change in the feminine body ideal over time. I looked at the shift in society’s appreciation from a full to a slim female body and how the latter has become a beauty ideal in contemporary times. This has influenced women’s perceptions of their bodies and themselves. Following that, I presented the notion of body image and its relationship with other social elements. Appreciating thinness and its shift to being a social requirement and a beauty ideal play a role in forming women’s body image. Expanding that to other social elements, the literature emphasises the role of the media in shaping women’s body image and defining their subjectivities. Especially in the contemporary era, the media and social media occupy a considerable amount of time and space in individuals’ lives. Consequently, and consciously or not, images presented in the media become a rule that should be followed. I focused on classifying women’s bodies as a ‘problem’ within society and the available solutions to solve the problem.

Following that, I discussed the work of two philosophers, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, whose theories frame this research. I explored Foucault’s concepts of disciplinary power, surveillance and technologies of the self. Foucault sees that power relations among individuals can govern individuals’ actions and behaviour. Foucault is not referring to governmental or institutional sources of power, but the power in mundane life that motivates individuals’ practices and behaviour. Moreover, I focused on Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power, which is the taken-for-granted truth which legitimates sources of power. Further, I discussed Foucault’s notion of surveillance, applying his example of the panopticon. As he claims, within societies, individuals are always under surveillance. They feel as if they are being watched by others. In fear of being judged by others, individuals monitor and govern their own behaviour accordingly. Foucault confirms that individuals have a ‘docile body’ which they can control and shape. I then moved on to Foucault’s concept of technologies of the self that individuals apply to their docile bodies. When individuals treat their docile bodies as projects to be accomplished, they apply what Foucault refers to as ‘disciplinary practices’, such as dieting and exercise.

Following that, I discussed the concepts of Bourdieu that are integral to this research: habitus and practice. Bourdieu unpacks individuals’ practices into smaller components, as no action is taken for granted. Bourdieu’s theories are the key to understanding individuals’ practices. He concludes that practice is the outcome of an
individual’s disposition, which is formed by their past experiences. This gives weight to childhood and family experiences. Women’s current subjectivities and the way they view their bodies are linked to their family habitus. By understanding that, I can grasp their experiences with various weight management practices through the way they define themselves. My discussion in Chapter 4 will review my participants’ body stories, and chapter 5 and 6 will seek to understand the experiences that my participants report regarding managing their bodies. The following chapter presents the methodological design that this research adopted.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Figure 9 Map of Chapter 3

- Introduction.
- Research questions and methodological approach.
- Philosophical stance for social research.
- The ontology and epistemology of qualitative research inquiry.
- Sampling: Selection and recruitment of participants.
- Qualitative interviews.
- Diaries as a qualitative method of data collection.
- Participant observation.
- Female family gathering observation.
- Data analysis.
- Researcher reflections.
- Challenges.
- Ethical issues.
- Summary.
3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the research design and the methodological approach that was taken to operationalise or enact the research questions. A mixed qualitative methods approach for data collection has been adopted and will be justified and outlined. This chapter presents the procedures for participants’ recruitment and data analysis. Further, it details the philosophical position of this social research, in terms of ontology and epistemology. Here, I will include a consideration of my role as a researcher and a reflection on the fieldwork. This sheds light on the challenges I encountered in the field, particularly those as a female researcher in a male-dominated society (Al-Rasheed, 2013). In this chapter I give an account of the ethical considerations that informed the research design, framed the fieldwork engagement and which are appreciated during the analysis.

3.2 Research questions and methodological approach

Reviewing the research questions, I aim – as a researcher – to explore the social and cultural factors that shape women’s subjectivities and thus the way in which they manage their bodies. Social and cultural factors that are present in women’s daily lives are examined. Moreover, I aim to uncover the factors that motivate women to control their bodies and their experiences in doing so. In that sense, this study contributes to knowledge by providing a compilation of the daily factors that form women’s definition of subjectivity and are thereby reflected in their behaviour, practices and choices. My purpose here is to reveal the meanings embedded within Saudi women’s practices regarding their weight and how they feel and think about their bodies. I believe that different women have different motivations and experiences and thus apply different techniques to keep their weight under control. I reiterate my research questions:

RQ1: What are the socio-cultural factors that influence Saudi Arabian women’s weight management practices? And how do they affect their choice of these practices?

RQ2: What are Saudi Arabian women’s experiences, motivations, expectations and understanding of weight management practices?

Within the Saudi Arabian context, the appreciation of slenderness is quite a contemporary phenomenon that has come to the fore of late. The growing number of diet centres, nutrition clinics and gyms – though no official statistics have been published –
gives a sense of the significance of the issue of managing weight in Saudi society. When I visited some of these places and inquired about the percentage of customers who are male and female, the managers at all of them confirmed that women constitute the largest segment of their business. In addition to other cultural considerations about being a woman, the aim of this research is to investigate this social phenomenon and discover its details and nuances, particularly among women and from a women’s viewpoint and lived experience and subjectivity. The thesis focuses on consumer experiences in terms of participating in weight management practices, which entails the collection of deep data and its analysis.

Conducting social research, I have to start with reviewing the literature and construct a theoretical framework, which I have done in the previous chapter. Moreover, it is crucial to state clear research questions in order to illustrate the exact scope of the research (Bryman, 2008). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning and make sense of their world (Berg, 2009). Quantitative research tests a theory on a large population so as to produce statistical facts, and hence, generalizable results. In that sense, there is no great advantage to designating a list of aims and objectives, as is the case for quantitative research (Blaikie, 2010).

All human actions carry embedded meanings, on the basis of which people act (Bryman, 2008). Indeed, in order to describe individuals’ experiences and behaviour, a list of hypotheses or assumptions cannot be set (Berg, 2009). Rather, posing exploratory questions, to which definitive answers are not expected, gives the researcher the opportunity to reveal the ‘world of reality’ as consumers see it (Mason, 2002). Designing clear research questions provides a clearer view of what the study hopes to address. Moreover, identifying the type of research questions helps to illuminate the philosophical stance, ontology and epistemology of this research. In this research, I aim to explore women’s experiences regarding the technologies they apply to manage and control their weight and bodies as “individuals … attach their own meanings to and act upon the objects in their world” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995: 248). Understanding the values and meanings women attach to their practices illuminates consumption patterns, which are affected by consumers’ life experiences and values (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

Justifying the application of a qualitative approach, Elliott and Timulak (2005) suggest that following a qualitative methodology is the most suitable way to address exploratory, open-ended questions. Within consumer research, many scholars have
deemed qualitative inquiry to be the most suitable approach for studying individuals within their societies, in order to obtain a rich analysis. These scholars include Bordo (1992), Chernin (1994), Hesse-Biber (1996), Featherstone (2010), and many others. Their studies yielded deep and rich data for analysis. In this research’s scope, women’s experiences and subjectivities regarding their bodies is a main concern. To gain a deep understanding of women’s experiences in weight management practices, qualitative inquiry is followed to obtain and analyse data.

3.3 Philosophical stance for social research

Within the Western context, consumer research journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Research* and the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, as well as other sources, reflect an emphasis on the significance of undertaking qualitative inquiry for approaching consumer research. This allows the researcher to get closer to individual consumers rather than just identify a number of preferences. For instance, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) critique the philosophical foundation of ‘modernism’ – positivism – as a philosophical foundation for studying consumer behaviour. They claim that modernism’s stance has overlooked the richness of consumer experiences and limits the world to the duality of superior/inferior, male/female, producer/consumer, culture/nature, etc. Thus, many scholars emphasise the importance of an interpretive approach in consumer research. For instance, Goulding (1999) argues that during the 1980s and 1990s, the approach to studying consumer behaviour shifted from ‘positivist’ to ‘interpretive’ due to the limitations of the former in analysing the ‘truth’ in terms of investigating consumer behaviour.

This research aims to answer *what* questions in order to understand a targeted social phenomenon. As this research investigates consumer experiences, Hirschman argues that ‘marketing’ cannot stand by itself, rather it “is viewed as a socially constructed enterprise” (1986: 237). Hence, engaging consumers’ experiences and practices within their culture and social norms as partners in forming a market is a fundamental issue. The essence of giving ‘culture’ considerable weight in studying consumer behaviour is that “no human exists except steeped in the culture of his time and place” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995: 248). These approaches recognise that detaching consumers from their culture and the meaning embedded in their experiences is an impossible task. In this sense, I agree with Hirschman (1986), Firat and Venkatesh
(1995), and Goulding (1999) regarding the importance of undertaking qualitative inquiry to undertake consumer research.

3.4 The ontology and epistemology of qualitative research inquiry

One necessity in undertaking qualitative research is having a clear vision and statement of the researcher’s philosophical stance, which comprises ontology, epistemology and methodology. As explained by Carson et al., “ontology is reality, epistemology is the relationship between that reality and the researcher and the methodology is the technique(s) used by the researcher to discover that reality” (2001: 15 emphasis in the original). Hence, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) argue that a social researcher is restricted within these three premises – ontology, epistemology and methodology – which are a “basic set of beliefs that guide actions” (Guba, 1990: 17). In philosophy, ontology concerns the “nature of social reality” (Blaikie, 2010). It questions whether the reality under investigation exists independently, that is, without the intervention of the subject. Or is it constructed and created according to the subject’s interpretations and cognition?

Based on the nature of the research and the scope, my ontological position follows a constructivist ontology, which aims to understand “the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994: 118). Moreover, a constructivist ontology “see[s] people, and their interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings, as the primary data sources” (Mason, 2002: 56). As long as reality is located within individuals’ minds, it needs their interpretation to be preserved by the researcher because reality cannot exist outside of their mental construction (Guba, 1990).

As society consists of groups of individuals, there are multiple realities embedded in their minds (Hirschman, 1986). To understand the meanings that people ascribe to their actions, I need to interpret these actions from each individual’s perspective “rather than forcing them into some pre-existing structure of the researcher’s making” (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000: 191). This approach allows my participants the opportunity to express the meanings they attach to their practices and gives them the space to express themselves and their world from their own point of view. The interpretive approach emphasises individuals’ understandings and interpretations of the ‘real world’ on the studied topic. This approach, Szmigin and Foxall (2000) argue, is crucial for studying consumer experiences. The experiences, thoughts, feelings and meanings that women – the
participants in this study—attribute to their practices do not exist in the world independently from the individuals; rather, they are constructed and built through the individuals’ actions, interpretations and consciousness of their world.

Epistemology can be determined based on the ontological assumptions of the research. Clarifying a study’s epistemological stance is essential for the researcher to make explicit “how knowledge can be demonstrated” (Mason, 2002:16). Epistemology comprises the questions of: How will the researcher be able to access data? Will the researcher have a role in reality construction? That is to say, it examines “the relationship between that reality and researcher” (Carson et al., 2001: 15).

Interpretivist epistemology suggests that the researcher is required to illuminate “the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors” (Schwandt, 1994: 118). Thus, the aim of this research, to investigate women’s experiences, motivations and understanding of the ways in which they manage their bodies, can only be achieved by co-construction between researcher and participants. Hence, this research follows an interpretivist epistemology, which suggests that reality can be constructed by the interaction between the researcher and the researched. To access the participants’ reality, it is important to build a relationship between the two. It is crucial to interact with the women in order to understand reality from their own perspectives. Therefore, the researcher cannot be detached from the studied phenomenon; rather he/she is a part of it on account of interacting with it (Hirschman, 1986).

In addition to ontology and epistemology, a social researcher needs to explain the methodology of their research. A methodology is chosen for being “the best means for acquiring knowledge about the world” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008: 245). Methodology is a collection of ‘rules and procedures’ that a researcher applies in order to collect and analyse data (Carson et al., 2001). This research follows interpretive consumer research traditions in terms of procedures of choosing sample size, recruitment process, ways of storing and analysing the data.

I argue that in order to understand the social phenomenon, I need to allow the participants to narrate their stories, express their feelings and demonstrate their experiences of their bodies and the meanings they attribute to the way they see themselves. By listening to their stories and observing them at their female gatherings, I seek to understand how women are motivated to practise certain techniques to control their bodies by their culture and society. This research aims to make sense of how Saudi
women feel and think about themselves and their bodies in order to understand their behaviour of consuming weight management products and services. In addition, I consider the socio-cultural factors that play a role in influencing their subjectivities and thus their behaviour. In the following section, I discuss the research design, sampling and the methods for data collection.

3.5 Sampling: Selection and Recruitment of Participants

Based on my ontological and epistemological assumptions, investigating a social phenomenon requires a direct and firm relationship with the participants. Qualitative research concerns a specific phenomenon with a tightly focused scope rather than generalisation. Hence, choosing the ‘right’ participants who can provide meaningful and useful data, which will help the researcher to “develop an empirically and theoretically grounded argument” (Mason, 2002: 121) about the scope of their research, is important. For this research, I aim to recruit mother and daughter dyads in order to address research questions. One of the research aspects is identify the cultural change and generational shift in relation to women’s bodies. In addition, I aim to study family habitus that shapes women’s subjectivities and their dispositions to participate in weight management practices.

As this research investigates women’s experiences and practices with regard to managing their bodies, nonprobability sampling is the most appropriate sampling approach. Bernard defines nonprobability sampling as “choosing cases on purpose, not randomly” (2013: 162). This sampling technique was chosen due to the research topic and research questions which seek to understand diversity of experience and view point rather than to count the incidence of experience within a population. Indeed, it can be expected that participants are individual in their experience - though there may be connections and similarities, there is no aim or desire to simply the complexity and individuality. To recruit participants, I visited weight management institutions – diet centres, nutrition clinics and gyms – in order to recruit women who are actively engaged in controlling their bodies. The sample was recruited in Jeddah city in Saudi Arabia where there is a growing number of weight management institutions. Notably, these weight management institutions have branches around the country.

Initially, I visited a diet centre, a nutrition clinic and a gym. I introduced myself to the management and provided them with the ‘gatekeeper letter’ that explained my
purpose of being there. After obtaining permission from management, I started approaching female customers. First, I posted an invitation on the advert board in the diet centre, and left leaflets in the reception areas of the nutrition clinic and the gym. In the following two weeks I received several calls from interested women who were curious to know about the research but ultimately declined to participate. I subsequently returned to the same locations and sat in the waiting areas in order to approach potential participants directly. The gym did not have a waiting area; thus, I stood near the reception (for around four hours) in order to recruit customers for the study. I repeated this procedure for ten days but only managed to recruit two participants. The particular problem I encountered was identifying mother and daughter dyads who were both willing to participate in my research. One participant, whose mother was happy to participate, was recruited from the nutrition clinic, and the other participant was approached at a diet centre, and her mother also agreed to take part.

Eventually, and to recruit more participants, I followed snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a purposive or nonprobability technique where the researcher seeks out participants who fulfil particular criteria based on the research questions. In this method, initial contacts are asked to invite their families and friends to participate in the research (Corbetta, 2003; Williams and Vogt, 2011). Thus, I phoned the aforementioned and gave them an idea about my research and how they can participate. Moreover, I asked them to introduce me to other potential participants who are actively engaged in body control practices. This way, I expanded my sample using the snowballing process. This process was easier than the initial recruitment method because both participants suggested many other potential participants who were happy to accept.

In total, I managed to recruit twelve participants – six mother and daughter dyads – which I believed was a sufficient number to answer research questions. Using a relatively small number of participants could be critical. However, it is a common practice in qualitative research. There are many other qualitative inquiry in social studies which were conducted on small samples and yet have produced valuable results, for instance, Bava et al. (2008) (11 participants); Maor (2012) (22 participants); Chapman (1997) (8 participants); Tawfiq and Ogle (2013) (15 participants); Thompson (1996) (7 participants); Olsen (1999) (5 participants). In that sense, the application of the research by investigating a small sample size does not per se preclude the credibility of the study. To overcome this limitation, I used mixed qualitative methods in order to get deeper insight into the phenomenon and generate rich data rather than aiming to generalise
findings. Such a number of participants, as McCracken posits, is not aimed to represent the whole society, rather it “offers … an opportunity to glimpse the complicated character, organisation, and logic of culture” (1988: 17).

The table below displays the timeline of data collection and analysis. During the first phase, I travelled to Jeddah and visited the diet centre, nutrition clinic and gym. At this time, I contacted the gatekeepers for permission to access their institutions in order to recruit participants. By the second phase, I had my participants ready and I started the interviews and observations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Research procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>1st to 30th April 2014</td>
<td>Jeddah, Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Visit to diet centre, nutrition clinic and gym to recruit participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>5th July to 18th September 2014</td>
<td>Jeddah, Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>- Conducting interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Attending female family gatherings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Requesting the participants to write diaries, by the end of each interview I handed out diaries. Collected a month later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- All interviews were conducted at participants’ homes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20th July 2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Interviewing Rawda and Neda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30th July 2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Interviewing Layal and Hanan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8th August 2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Interviewing Noran and Nora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15th August 2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Interviewing Kadi and Fayza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22 August 2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Interviewing Hela and Beasan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25th August 2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Attending Hela’s female family gathering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8th September 2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Interviewing Fadiah and Faten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15th September 2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Attending Fadiah’s female family gathering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>October 2014 to April 2017</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Interviews transcribing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Transcripts translation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Data analysis on several layers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Write the two empirical chapters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-1 timeline of data collection and analysis

The table below provides a summary of my participants who had been interviewed during the fieldwork trip. It shows the diversity of my participants’ ages, occupations and marital status. For the confidentiality agreement, I have changed the participants’ names. Due to ethical considerations, I am sensitive to participant anonymity therefore I assured anonymity and confidentiality for my participants. In addition, I will not include contextual family details that could reveal mother-daughter dyads’ identity. Ethical considerations will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family (in the order of interviews)</th>
<th>Name (alias)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Years of marriage</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family 1</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Rawda</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Neda</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family 2</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Layal</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Hanan</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family 3</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Noran</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family 4</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Kadi</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Fayza</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family 5</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Hela</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Beasan</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family 6</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Fadiah</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Faten</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-2 Research Participants

In the first trip, the fieldwork consisted of gaining access and advertising my research in order to find participants. This was not a straightforward process. To access the institutions, I had to visit them more than once to meet the managers. Once I did that, I started posting out my research invitation to them. After waiting two weeks, I visited them again and approached potential participants in the waiting areas. In this way, I succeeded in recruiting two participants, who are customers at weight management institutions. These two women expressed interest in participating. I arranged to meet them at their homes. I interviewed the first participant – a customer at the diet centre – and asked her to introduce me to her daughter for an interview. However, she mentioned that a personal matter prevented her from participating in the interview. Similarly, I interviewed the second participant, who was a customer at the nutrition clinic, and then I requested to interview her mother. Again, I could not do the interview, as the mother had now changed her mind and was not interested in taking part.

Nonetheless, these two women referred me to other potential participants who could fulfil my criteria of being a mother-daughter dyad and customers of a weight management institution. Thus, the first phase of data collection was to recruit the sample. Meanwhile, during the second phase, I started to contact the participants via WhatsApp (mobile phone messaging application), as this was the most convenient and quick way to
keep in touch with them. Overall, recruiting participants was more complicated than I expected due to the criteria I had set. It was hard to find mother and daughter dyads who were willing to participate. Therefore, not all of the women I contacted were the right participants. During the process of sampling potential participants, I also interviewed women who promised to introduce their mother or daughter on other days, but never responded afterwards.

3.5.1 Qualitative Interviews

As this research undertakes qualitative inquiry, it aims to translate a reality in the form of a “series of representations, including notes, interviews, conversations … and memos of the self” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008: 4). Based on my ontological assumption, reality is located in individuals’ minds and embedded in their experiences, behaviour and, thus narrations. Therefore, I had to actively interact with participants through means of questions and conversations in order to “gain access to their accounts and articulations” (Mason, 2002: 64). To achieve that, the interview is one of the most widely used and appropriate methods to collect qualitative data (Mason, 2002). Indeed, McCracken illustrates the reason qualitative researchers carry out interviews thus:

The purpose of the qualitative interview is not to discover how many, and what kind of, people share a certain characteristic. It is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world (1988: 17).

Mason (2002: 62) argues that the term qualitative interview could be used to describe in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured interviews. However, to categorise the interview as qualitative, it should take one form or another of immediate interaction with the participant. For my research, I apply the term ‘qualitative interview’ as a description of the nature of my interviews, and to reflect the fact that this is the best way to access individuals’ history. In that sense, a qualitative interview is a social setting and interaction where the researcher takes active and reflexive action to access ‘knowledge’, making it a situational condition (Mason, 2002).

To apply the interview method, the researcher should have a clear vision about the literature and theoretical framework which informs him/her about the topic under investigation (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002; McCracken, 1988). The theoretical framework for this research is Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Foucault’s notion of power. Thus, the formulation of the interview questions stemmed from these concepts.
In summer 2014, I started data collection in the second phase of fieldwork after recruiting participants in the first phase earlier in the year. I commenced with data collection by interviewing the mothers and their daughters during the first month of the trip. As mentioned previously, recruiting participants was not as easy as I expected; it needed significant time and effort to be achieved. Finding both a mother and a daughter who are willing to participate in the research; arranging times that suited both of them and visiting their homes was a difficult and time-consuming process. Interviews were the first step of data collection.

For each family, the interviews were carried out on the same day. Indeed, I had to visit each family’s home once to conduct the interviews with both mother and daughter. As a stranger, participants will not feel comfortable for me visiting their homes more than once according to cultural norms. All of the participants were interviewed individually as planned. The duration of the interviews ranged between 45 minutes and two hours. Some participants were talkative and enthusiastic about narrating their experiences with managing their weight. They told their stories as big successes and achievements, as this issue constitutes a substantial part of their lives. One of the interviews lasted for two hours, as the participant was very excited about her successful experiences losing weight. On the other hand, other participants were shy and reserved, giving only short answers. The less talkative participants required more effort from me in the form of encouraging them to expand and illustrate their answers. I did this by giving them floating prompts and questions seeking clarification of their answers (McCracken, 1988).

According to Saudi cultural values, carrying out the interviews at participants’ homes was the best choice for many reasons. Because it is their own place, it is more comfortable, convenient and private for them. Culturally, women are under men’s control in many aspects of their life, and leaving home and meeting people outside the home is one of those aspects (Le Renard et al., 2008). Women need permission to leave the home for any reason. Coming from this culture, I know that even if women had the permission to meet me for an interview outside their home, they would be worried about time and going back home, which would not make for an ideal situation for the interview. Therefore, meeting them at their homes made them relaxed and confident to talk freely about themselves without being worried about their privacy, which is highly important in this particular society. Moreover, because of cultural norms, being at their own homes means they are in the private sphere where they are not required to wear an *abaya* (the
ankle-length black robe), which makes them feel more covered and secure about their bodies. More cultural context is discussed in chapter 1.

When I visited participants’ homes, they welcomed and hosted me in the guest room, and they offered me food and drink. These visits were the first time I saw them, as I had only contacted them by phone when other participants referred me to them. I confirmed the confidentiality of all participants with each family. This entailed confirming to both mother and daughter that the other family member would not be informed about what they said in their interviews, in order to give them total freedom to speak. For example, when I asked one of the daughters, Beasan, a question about her mother, she asked if her mother would know her answer. I confirmed again her confidentiality at that time, though all of the participants had already signed the consent letter, which guarantees their privacy.

I started each interview with what McCracken (1988) calls ‘grand-tour’ questions. These are biographic questions that enable participants to introduce themselves with their name, age, marital status, etc. (McCracken, 1988). All interviews were recorded on a recording device and subsequently transcribed. During each interview, I asked my participants the list of questions, each of which were followed by “floating prompts” based on the points they raised in their answers (McCracken, 1988: 37). These questions helped participants to express and freely describe their experiences and in more detail. During the interviews, I took notes about the participants.

These notes were interesting because in some cases, what I observed was contrary to what the participant was claiming. For example, Noran emphasised her comfort and satisfaction with her body. However, she was wearing a long, loose black dress – what other participants claim signified discomfort with one’s body. This is because this type of clothing hides body curves especially for overweight women. Participants tended to share the opinion that someone who was satisfied with her body would wear form-fitting, fashionable clothes. Also, she was holding the sofa cushion all the time in a way that hid her abdomen. Taking note of these nuances revealed more about Noran’s subjectivity.

During the interviews, I used two recording devices to assure that each interview was recorded and saved. Also, I had a small notebook where I wrote down my observations about participants’ behaviour and gestures. For example, I wrote down what each woman was wearing and how she acted during the interview. Also, at the end of some interviews, both mother and daughter sat with me to chat about the topic. This is because they were interested in telling their stories and experiences. For instance, Noran
and Nora were talking about the son’s – Nora’s brother – comment on their bodies. The mother was laughing about that as she found it funny, but the daughter showed her annoyance by her brother’s comment on her. She said to her mother “you don’t get upset with his comments because he’s your spoiled child and you love him”.

At the end of each interview, I used the ‘auto-driving’ prompting technique or so-called stimulus (Morgan, 1996). According to McCracken (1988: 36), auto-driving prompts refer to the process whereby the researcher presents some materials, such as photos or videos, to the participants and asks them to comment on them. This sort of visual prompt is beneficial in encouraging participants to reflect more on social and cultural issues. Here, I presented two main materials: newspaper cartoons making fun of fat women and the logos of various weight management institutions. My aim in choosing newspaper cartoons that mocks women (shown below in Figure 3.1) as stimuli for discussion is to get beneath the surface of the cartoons to obtain the participants’ opinions of how accurate they are in reflecting society. These cartoons were used as prompts because I noticed that this type of cartoon, which mocks Saudi women and depicts them as fat and ugly, is very popular in a certain daily newspaper.

The pictures of diet centres’ and gyms’ logos were also presented as stimuli to elicit a response from the participants. All of the participants confirmed that these places did not exist twenty years ago. They further confirmed that the number of these centres is growing noticeably. Hanan made a connection between the two stimuli. She indicated that because of the constant mockery of women, how they are degraded because of their weight and figure, women try to reduce and control their weight. She explains that the weight management centres have appeared and flourished because of the attitude shown in the cartoons. Thus, presenting visual materials gave the participants even more chances to think about this phenomenon and explain it from their own points of view. In addition to cartoons presented in Chapter 1, here are some of the stimuli materials used (the callouts are meant to be read from right to left).
"Love is like the moon: if it is not full, it is not perfect!

حب كالقمر إن لم يرذ نقش!!

1) This is the third dress I’ve bought and it’s too tight, it doesn’t fit.

2) Strange!!!

ناذن ثالث...

This cartoon depicts the first and second years of marriage, with the first year showing a healthy woman and the second year showing a woman who has gained weight. The text box reads: "Love is like the moon: if it is not full, it is not perfect!

Newspaper cartoons mocking women’s weight, which were presented to the participants as stimuli in the interviews (with translations).
Using these cartoons as stimulus in the interviews were useful and effective. It brought up insights into ideas and thoughts for participants that aided them to remember even more details about the topic that they did not mention before during the interview. These cartoons made some participants laugh but other participants expressed their annoyance. Actually, their expressions were not about the cartoons per se, rather they were about society stereotyping women as fat and ugly especially after marriage. All participants believed that these cartoons have been drawn by men, as they are always critical of them. Further, these cartoons reflected the cultural and generational change.

Figure 11 Newspaper cartoons mocking women’s weight, which were presented to the participants as stimuli in the interviews (with translations)
Mothers confirmed that these sort of cartoons and the notions underpinning them did not exist in the past.

3.5.2 Diaries as a qualitative method of data collection

Written diaries were first used by the Japanese Emperor’s court in the tenth century to write ‘vernacular literature’ before the form of modern diaries developed. Regularity and personality are the most important features that distinguish the written diary from other types of documents (Alaszewski, 2006: 1). In addition to written diaries, there are other types of diaries, such as audio or video recorded and photographed diaries, which have been established due to technological and economic improvement (Alaszewski, 2006; Chaplin, 2004). Eventually, the notion of a diary was deployed in the social sciences as a method to access individuals’ minds. In that sense, diaries could reveal how individuals form and reform their subjectivities within their daily life experiences (Bolger et al., 2003). Bolger et al. (2003: 579) define diaries as:

Diaries, self-report instruments used repeatedly to examine ongoing experiences, offer the opportunity to investigate social, psychological, and physiological processes, within everyday situations

In that respect, diaries can capture events, individuals’ moods, and experiences in real time, so they reveal participants’ interpretation of consistent daily behaviour (Cassell and Symon, 2004; Nicholl, 2010). To put it differently, diaries reflect the way in which individuals see and interpret the world in their own words (Alaszewski, 2006) on everyday bases rather than in the interview. That makes diaries reflect events nearer to the time they happened which tend to be retrospective stories and have a biographical element to them.

In qualitative inquiry, the diary method has been used in several social science disciplines, such as health studies, education, feminist studies and psychology (Patterson, 2005; Alaszewski, 2006). However, the application of diaries in consumer research, in particular, has been overlooked or rarely mentioned as a data collection method (Patterson, 2005). Nevertheless, scholars such as Patterson (2005) started to support the application of this method, as it brings rich insights into consumer behaviour (Zarantonello and Luomala, 2011). Patterson justifies the purpose of using diaries in consumer research as “an innovative way to capture rich insights into processes, relationships, settings, products, and consumers” (2005: 142). Following that rationale, Zarantonello and Luomala (2011) used diaries to study consumers’ consumption of
chocolate in different contexts, as they were investigating their participants’ feelings and thoughts about consuming chocolate. Their application for diaries provided their research with valuable and rich data, and demonstrates the feasibility of applying diaries in consumer research within a Western context.

As this project is a consumer research study investigating individuals’ behaviour, applying diaries is particularly appropriate. Firstly, it conforms to the ontological and epistemological position of the research. Secondly, the concept of diaries supports the theoretical framework of my research, which is looking at power in the form of surveillance. In this respect, I can monitor women’s experiences of their bodies and weight on a daily basis from their own point of view. Thus, the purpose of employing diaries as a data collection technique is to uncover aspects of consumer experiences that were not revealed by other methods, namely interviews and participant observation (Patterson, 2005). Notably, the use of diaries for data collection is considered to be one of the most difficult methods to apply, though it can be a very useful source of data if it has been done properly (Zarantonello and Luomala, 2011).

Andy Alaszewski (2006), in his book Using Diaries for Social Research, has provided a comprehensive overview of the employment of diaries in social research. He also argues that the development and pervasiveness of modern diaries has been influenced by the growth of ‘surveillance’. Social surveillance, which leads to self-surveillance, is one reason for the existence of modern diaries. People keep diaries to monitor themselves in a written form. For this particular research, I found the use of diaries to be valuable. Investigating women’s experiences and feelings about their bodies is a very personal and complex issue. It is highly associated with their feelings and the way they articulate their subjectivities. Keeping a diary of daily experiences and feelings about their bodies can yield nuanced insights into the participants. Following Alaszewski’s (2006) technique of the qualitative diary, this method was selected to complement the interviews and observations. Moreover, a perusal of marketing studies that have been carried out in Saudi Arabia did not turn up any research that used diaries as a method of data collection. I believe applying this particular method is beneficial for the research. Investigating women’s bodily experiences is a sensitive issue that includes many details and nuances. These detailed stories, feelings, thoughts and emotions are best to be expressed nearer to the time of the experience as they will be much more accurate.

At the end of each interview, I informed the participants that the interview had ended and a new activity would start. I gave each of my 12 participants a diary in the
form of an A4 sized booklet, comprising 16 blank pages for 8 entries – twice a week for a month. The cover page had the instructions for keeping the diary, as well as my phone number in case they had any questions. One of the guidelines noted that the number of necessary pages had been estimated and that they could expand it with extra pages as needed. It also contained a few simple questions that could help the participants and give them ideas about how to write in these diaries, especially since this was expected to be a totally new concept to them. I emphasised the importance of keeping these diaries and ensured that they understood their task. My aim in applying this method was to explore women’s subjectivities and personal comments regarding their bodies, which might not have become apparent or which they did not mention in the interviews.

Considering that none of my participants had kept a diary before, even a simple one, I argue that applying this would be challenging, to some extent. For example, when I asked Hanan to keep a diary, she said: “we don’t write diaries, no one does. It is only popular in the West. We don’t like this sort of stuff”. All of the participants had a similar opinion and stated that they had never kept a diary. That made it more difficult to explain it to them and to persuade them to write in it. At the end of each interview, I gave the participants their diary. One month after each interview, I contacted the participants to collect their diaries. Only eight out of the twelve actually wrote in the diaries and returned them to me. The rest of the participants did not do it, as they claimed that they did not have time. In fact, according to the study’s ethical form, it was the participant’s option to choose not to write in the diaries because it is a private document. Having said that, the data for some of the participants was more nuanced than others because they provided me with this additional source of data. The diaries emphasised what the women mentioned in the interviews but with more detail, and also supported my observations in female family gatherings. For example; in the interview Hanan mentioned that when she went to family gatherings she broke the diet. In her diary, she said she felt guilty about breaking her diet. Also, she noted “I was eating desserts and my mom kept staring at me and by eye contact she was telling me to stop eating, hahaha I ignored her and finished my plate!”

As I mentioned previously, not all of the participants completed their diary. As for those who did, I argue that this method worked to some extent. Half of them did not write in the diaries as instructed; they used it more like a log or a journal of what they ate. They did not mention their feelings or experiences regarding their diets, exercising, their bodies or even their social interactions. This can be considered a ‘disadvantage’ of
applying the diary method, as it may produce “thin” rather than “thick description” (Patterson, 2005: 144). Indeed, this was the case with my participants’ diaries. The diaries that were kept as instructed contained only very brief descriptions, but said a bit more about their lives and experiences than what they mentioned in the interview.

3.5.3 Participant observation

Because interviews and diaries were set individually, they captured the social and familial setting differently. The individual’s narrations and interpretations of the world from their own perspective can vary. As discussed previously in the thesis, female family gatherings are the most important arena for women’s socialisation and thus surveillance. Attending female family gatherings, observing and taking notes, helped to reveal the unspoken manners that occur there. Therefore, the participant observation method is employed in this research in addition to qualitative interviews and diaries. According to the epistemological position of qualitative research, interviews and participant observation are valuable and effective methods of data collection (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002).

Including participant observation in a qualitative inquiry into a particular social phenomenon helps uncover the complexity and depth of that phenomenon (Mason, 2002). Gerson and Horowitz (2002) explain the purpose of applying these two particular methods together, interview and participant observation: exploring individuals’ past experiences can be done by interviewing them and listening to their narrations. However, interviewing alone might fail to grasp “ongoing interactions” which can be captured by observation (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002: 199). Thus, observing participants in their natural settings exposes the ongoing interactions that participants might not articulate while being interviewed because they take certain facts for granted (Plasatis, 2016).

The method of participant observation is frequently used in ethnographic research. It is also applied in cultural anthropology and sociology research (Hirschman, 1986). Mason (2002) classifies participant observation as an independent method not solely attached to the ethnographic approach. Consumer research aims to fully understand consumer behaviour that can be achieved through applying multiple methods. Indeed, participant observation has rarely been used as a primary or sole source of data in qualitative research (Hirschman, 1986; DeWalt, 2011). Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003) agree that participant observation cannot stand alone as a data collection method in
consumer research. However, they highlighted the benefit of this method as one amongst others, as it can reveal unsaid and unwritten behaviour, thereby ameliorating the limitations of questioning in qualitative interviews (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). It illuminates implicit aspects of culture that individuals may not be aware of (DeWalt, 2011). This helps, therefore, to answer the research questions in greater detail.

Mason defines participant observation as “methods of gathering data which entail the researcher immersing herself … in a research ‘setting’ so that they can experience and observe … a range of dimensions” (2002: 84). It involves many aspects which produce and generate qualitative data, such as unstructured interactions between subjects in their natural settings. These interactions include non-verbal behaviour, gestures, daily life activities, and other things that cannot be found with other types of methods (Mason, 2002). Underpinned by my epistemological assumptions, participant observation – like interviews – entails the researcher’s interaction and engagement in order to yield data. Knowledge is constructed and co-constructed in interactions between the researcher and participants. Thus, it is the researcher’s role to interpret the meaning embodied within individuals’ behaviour and language (Schwandt, 1994).

Kaplan emphasised the vitality of the researcher’s role and interactions in building knowledge within participant observation:

> Effective observation of human affairs is virtually impossible without some degree of participation in what is being observed: there are not many one-way mirrors … Without participation, data, even if somehow made visible, remains cryptic (Kaplan, 1984: 33).

For this thesis, I argue that participant observation fits the research questions, theoretical framework and philosophical assumptions. Observing the mother and daughter dyads in their weekly female family gatherings helps me to link their comments with their actual familial settings. This allowed me to get closer to individuals in order to understand their behaviour within its natural context, which creates meanings for their actions. Participant observation also helps map out nuances and differences within each family’s habitus compared to other families, which all together can reveal cultural aspects. The interactions and dynamics of each family, commonalities of which can reveal cultural issues, are important to address the research questions. Moreover, I can compare cultural aspects between families to ascertain what is socially and culturally accepted. Attending traditional female family gatherings, I participated in their
discussions, raised some points and expanded the conversation on the topics I wanted to investigate.

### 3.5.4 Female family gathering observation

The first step of participant observation is choosing the site where the researcher can capture the targeted data (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002). The researcher can spot the best location to conduct an observation based on the theoretical framework and research questions. In other words, the site depends on what the researcher is trying to find out. I am exploring socio-cultural factors that influence women’s participation in weight management practices. In Saudi society, female family gatherings are the best site to conduct participant observation to complement data collected in the interviews. This is because female family gatherings are the most important setting where women interact and present themselves in their society. Once again, Saudi society is gender segregated; consequently, the women’s community is separated from men’s. Female family gatherings are the place where women present themselves and show off their clothes, jewellery, etc. (Le Renard, 2014). As this gender segregation has “led to the development of a female sphere of activities”, female gatherings tend to be the only ‘outlet’ and ‘autonomous’ space where women can freely express themselves (Le Renard et al., 2008: 610).

The aim of participant observation is to observe women in their natural settings. The female family gatherings I observed were weekly gatherings which means I did not set up that group. Further, I observed women and joined their discussing without leading the conversation with a list of questions. In order to access female gatherings, I asked my participants to allow me to attend their weekly female gathering. Two of the families immediately responded and welcomed me, assigning the dates they gather and told me to join. The other four told me that they would make the arrangements and let me know later. This is a polite way – according to cultural norms – to show their disagreement or discomfort with having a stranger in their family gathering. Thus, I could not request again to visit them as their reply constituted a rejection.

The observation commenced with arranging the first visit by calling the mother of the first family. She informed me of the day that they gather in her house, and asked me to come early in the evening. I went there, and they welcomed me and let me in the living room. The room was clean and tidy and there were two family members; the rest
arrived later. There was already plenty of food on the table as snacks, for example, mini pizzas, sweets, coffee, and nuts. Arabic coffee is the most popular traditional drink in Saudi Arabia (Long, 2005), and during the observation they served Arabic coffee and dates. In Saudi culture, guests cannot reject food or drink offered by the host. Meanwhile, other family members started to arrive, daughters-in-law and cousins. Later, the host family served tea with pizza and other pastries and sweets. Some women stated that they were on a diet, but partook nevertheless.

During the visit, I participated in their conversation, which I felt more welcome to do due to the way they talked with me. Notably, when applying this method, the researcher should have guidelines or an agenda to make it clear what should be followed and what to expect from conducting participant observation. Thus, I had a list of points I wanted to cover, so I tried to direct the conversation at times to these topics. For example, when dinner was served, two ladies claimed that they were on a diet. I then asked them, “What diet? What is that for? When did you start?” But this was a group conversation because other family members were involved in the convention as well. Unlike the focus group method which is more systematic and formal, participant observation allows participants to act naturally in their gathering. As a researcher, my role was to expand their discussion in topics that were in my area of interest. Meanwhile, I was taking field notes as a researcher. I wrote ‘jot notes’ of the field, which are “the words, phrases or sentences that are recorded during the course of a day’s events as primarily aids to memory” (DeWalt, 2011: 160).

Entering such a private and intimate female space was a little worrying for me as an ‘outsider’ of the family. I was concerned that they might act differently due to my presence. At the same time, I had interesting thoughts and feelings about collecting data and operationalising this type of data that I would not be able to accomplish if I was a stranger.

To generate data, the researcher has to fully appreciate the importance of field notes. Being accurate in field notes will yield the data that the study aims to reveal (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Moreover, being an active observer means not only interacting with respondents; rather, the researcher should take notes, images, videos, etc. so as to understand and grasp individuals’ behaviour (Guest et al., 2012). I had a small notebook where I recorded short sentences and words. Immediately after each family gathering, I expanded the notes in as much detail as I could remember. Jackson construes the importance of field notes, as they “fix in my memory the incident I’m describing so that
when I later read them, a flood of detail comes back into conscious memory, and the subsequent analysis I do is not of the field notes but of the memory” (1995: 49).

During the gatherings, I was participating in their conversations so they would feel more relaxed and less tense on account of my presence as a researcher. Acting like a member of the family broke the barrier of being a stranger and made them feel relaxed and confident. Observing the families was interesting and enabled me to report family differences. In the first family, the mother was overweight while her four daughters had average-sized bodies. The mother was more covered, wearing loose clothing, while the daughters were wearing jeans and shirts. Without me mentioning diet and body issues, this was a regular topic of discussion. One of the daughters refused to have dinner with the family, saying she had a ready meal sachet for her dinner. Also, the other daughter was following a diet, so she ate only a little.

I observed that the mother, Hela, was trying to convince her daughters to stop dieting, as their bodies are average. In a sense, she was comparing her body with her daughters’, and thus she sees them as normal. She mentioned that she is the one who needs to diet. The mother was asking her daughters about different types of diets that she could follow without starving. She mentioned the blood type diet, which allows her to have certain types of food without limiting the quantity. In short, dieting was a normal topic of discussion in their gathering.

Moreover, they talked about a cousin who had had a gastric sleeve operation and how much weight she lost. Hela did not encourage her daughters to do something like that, nor did she support their dieting and efforts at weight management; in fact, she asked them to stop dieting as she believed they diet too much. Because of dieting, one of her daughters bought a ‘digital body analyser scale’ to monitor the difference in their body weight every week. It was new, and everyone was interested in trying it. The girls tried it, and it showed that two of them were normal while the third was slightly above normal. When it was the mother’s turn, she was not comfortable doing that. I noticed her hesitation and embarrassment at stepping on the scale to analyse her body weight. Eventually she did, and she was shocked, embarrassed and sad about her weight. She weighed 107 Kg, and over 50% of her weight was fat. At that time, she blamed herself for putting too much sugar in her tea. She said, “Oh my God, it has been years I did not step on a scale, I thought my weight is 90 kg. I think the sugar in tea is the cause of gaining weight. I’ll start a blood type diet”.
The second family gathering was slightly different. There were not as many snacks as with the first family. The way the mother and her daughters dressed was also more revealing than in the first family. They wore sleeveless and tight clothing that showed their curves, even though – according to the cultural scale – they were not all fit. Contrary to the first family, the mother here was fit and looked after herself while the daughters were overweight. Also unlike the first family, where a variety of snacks were served before dinner, the only snacks here were tea, coffee, dates and dried fruit. Again, the issue of weight and body were discussed without me having to raise them. However, when this topic started, I participated in and expanded their conversation about it.

It was obvious that the mother was very concerned about body and weight issues. For instance, the younger daughter, Faten, was eight weeks pregnant, and she said that “my mother-in-law told me to eat for two people, me and the baby”. The mother, Fadiah, replied: “No, that’s wrong, don’t eat too much, you’ll gain weight. Look at Hadeel [their cousin], she reached 80 Kg when she was pregnant, she was like a cow. Just eat your normal portion. For morning sickness you can have dried figs and apricots”.

This conversation and the nature of the gathering itself showed the mother’s concern about weight and health issues. Also, another family member, a cousin, mentioned that she had just come from the gym. Fadiah and her daughters commented on her appearance, as the weight she had lost was obvious. The cousin Hadeel said, “Of course I lost weight, I’m dieting, and going to the gym daily, I went from 62 to 49 kg”. Faten replied, “Your body now is amazing, just perfect”. Moreover, they were mentioning some belly dancers’ bodies and how beautiful and fit they are. The mother kept encouraging her daughters to watch what they ate and try to be healthy as much as they can.

Participant observation of the family gatherings confirmed some issues mentioned in the interviews, and at the same time also revealed unspoken aspects that were not mentioned previously. The issues of body weight, diet and exercise were very active and present. In both gatherings, women spontaneously spoke about diet, weight and food as part of their normal life. Talking about and mentioning diet and body size was a taken for granted issue that was interwoven into women’s social lives. Observation also revealed the habitus of each family. Looking at each family, I could extract familial relations and the mutual relationship between mother and daughters.

Unpacking these gatherings revealed unexpected information. For instance, the mother of the first family was obese and appeared to care less about body and health
issues. However, her daughters were very concerned about their bodies and weight. Despite their mother not encouraging them to maintain their diets, they insisted on looking after their bodies and losing weight. This indicates how the daughters see their mother, although they cannot express it.

3.6 Data analysis

As this research applied mixed qualitative methods, I have different sets of data; interview transcripts, jot notes and diaries. Each type of data was analysed using the most suitable technique. Defining data analysis, DeWalt (2011: 179) states:

> The goal of all data analysis is the summarization of large quantities of data into understandable information from which a well-supported and well-argued conclusion … that adds to the understanding of the phenomenon.

After transcribing interviews using transcription services, I had to translate the entire texts from Arabic to English after an initial attempt to work through them in Arabic. For the first interview, I tried to work with the original text in Arabic for the analysis, but I found this difficult. By that step, I attempted to maintain the original quality and nuance for the data. It took me a long time and I could not decode the data as I should. Due to the theoretical background I built through reading literature and designing the research, my rationale and apprehension of the theory was in English. Working through the data in Arabic therefore put pressure on me to translate the knowledge in my mind into Arabic. I tried this way but it did not succeed. It is worth mentioning that processing the data, from transcription until the final analysis, consumed a significant amount of time. It was an ongoing process that lasted from when I returned from the field until finalising and submitting the thesis.

Translating and analysing the text in English might open up a criticism of losing the sense and originality of the text. To overcome this dilemma, Simon (1996) suggests that translators have to be sensitive to the text rather than just translation word by word or finding synonyms. Hence, the researcher as a translator has the “significant opportunities for close attention to cross cultural meaning” (Temple and Young, 2004: 168). For these reasons, I translated the transcriptions myself to assure that I totally understood the data and could translate it in its proper context. Moreover, Temple and Young argue that a researcher as translator “must also form part of the process of knowledge production” (2004: 164 emphasis in the original). In light of the study’s
ontology and epistemology, I cannot detach myself from the research. Rather, I am involved in generating data. Translation is part of the analysis, as it entails “on-going interpretations” which helps to gain better comprehension of the data (Ekström, 2006: 504). For example, during the interviews, the participants would use idioms or cultural phrases, which I understood in the context. In that manner, translating the data from Arabic into English brought me closer to the data.

As this research investigates women’s body practices, taking notes about movements and expressions contributed to the understanding of the culture. For example, Noor was holding the sofa cushion during the interview, construing the notion of hiding the body from another’s gaze. My field notes regarding gestures, the way they dressed and their actions regarding their bodies were considered in the analysis. In addition, some of the data might not make sense to an outsider who does not share a cultural background with this society. Accordingly, being a Saudi woman who had similar experiences in the past afforded me the privilege to fully understand cultural meanings, which was reflected in the translation.

In total, I translated 75,896 words of interviews and diaries in preparation for analysis. My notes from the participant observations notes were in Arabic and translated into English concurrently with the analysis. This step was taken deliberately. Reading the field notes of the participant observation, I could remember the event, which helped me to write down more details for analysis. Dealing with very rich data was a major task to accomplish. The richness of the data required me to work and rework it on several levels (Blaikie, 2010). During the readings, I coded the data as a first attempt to unpack its content. I used manual coding in order to identify themes and sub-themes. Unlike a quantitative approach, in which data can be fully analysed through software, qualitative data require a long and in depth analysis that cannot be accomplished solely by means of computer software (Berg, 2009). However, there are some software programmes that can help organise qualitative data, such as NVivo, ATLAS, MAXQDA, and CAQDAS (Blaikie, 2010; Mason, 2002). Due to the nature of the data and the research scope, I determined that using any of these software programmes would not be helpful for my data analysis. Looking at each participant’s narration to build their body biography, in addition to investigating mother-daughter dyads to discern family habitus I did not utilise qualitative data analysis software.

For the next level of analysis, I rewrote each interview in the form of a ‘story’ out of the codes to glean new insights into it. Each woman has a unique story that reflects her
subjectivity. At the same time, I looked at their diaries in order to link these with the other sources of data. My reading of the data at this stage was “interpretive and reflexive”, aiming to carefully read between the lines (Mason, 2002: 149). Benefiting from being from the same culture, I could understand their narrations and thus the meanings embedded in their experiences. Working and reworking the interviewees’ ‘stories’, I managed to write the first empirical chapter, chapter 4, which narrates their body biographies. That understanding of my participants took me to the next level, in the following empirical chapter, to develop an argument in terms of finding themes and linking with the theoretical framework.

Proceeding with the data analysis, the third level was the attempt to draw out the themes. Bryman (2008) argues that some authors see themes and codes as the same thing, whereas other scholars construe the theme as a group of codes and concepts. Connecting the codes that were identified during the first level of analysis, I managed to elicit the themes that were used later across all the participants. As the research is shaped by the theoretical framework, these theories help the researcher to identify the themes that he/she is searching for regarding the research questions (Neuman, 2013). This is because qualitative data are massive and not identical, and in order to organise them I need theories or a conceptual framework. Braun and Clarke (2006: 84) define “‘theoretical’ thematic analysis” as the analysis that is based on the theory that the researcher applies to frame their research. Thus, a theoretical framework would help to access the data based on the researcher’s interest area. In this way, the extracted themes were relevant to the theoretical framework (Blaikie, 2010), thereby provided the presence of power in the form of surveillance. In addition, analysing data showed how habitus within the family context played a role in forming women’s subjectivities and thus their behaviour.

From a constructionist point of view, and based on the data and reviewed literature, the most suitable approach for analysis is ‘thematic analysis’. Indeed, thematic analysis has been widely used in qualitative research, for instance, thematic analysis has been used in consumer research such as Roberts and Pettigrew’s (2007) study of children’s food advertising, and other studies on women’s experiences, such as Singer and Hunter’s (1999) examination of menopause. In these studies, themes have emerged across the data. Braun and Clarke define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (2006: 79). To find patterns and themes within data, the researcher needs to carefully read their data transcripts and memos many times in order to find their thematic codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006;
Bryman, 2008). Responding to the criticism that thematic analysis is unclear and not labelled like other types of analysis, such as grounded theory, Braun and Clarke (2006) posit that all categories of qualitative analysis are basically a form of thematic analysis. Therefore, thematic analysis helps the researcher to identify their contribution to knowledge by providing a comprehensive understanding of the data (Bryman, 2008).

3.7 Researcher reflections

Conducting social research entails researcher participation in building knowledge. This positions the researcher as “value-laden” in that his or her own values play a significant role constructing the study in terms of choosing the phenomenon of study and the methodology of data collection and analysis (Hirschman, 1986: 238). In other words, the researcher’s beliefs, values and background influence the research. According to these ontological and epistemological assumptions, a qualitative researcher works as an instrument for their research as they design it and collect data based on individual relationships. In that sense, the researcher interacts with respondents to collect and analyse data regarding his/her personal experiences and values (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000).

Since a social researcher cannot be detached from the knowledge construction process, it is important to reflect on how his/her actions affect the process of data collection in order to clarify the researcher’s role (Mason, 2002). Hence, reflexivity is an important step to highlight the possible ways in which the researcher could influence the research (Creswell, 2014; Mason, 2002). Thus, in this way the researcher acknowledges their effect on the research (Bryman, 2008). Similarly, from a constructionist position, reflexivity is a crucial aspect in social research in terms of “research process and knowledge production” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 97).

In consumer research discourse, scholars draw researchers’ attention to articulating their roles and reflexivity so as to “improve understanding of the research process” (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009: 664). Doing so initially requires me to identify my position as a researcher, which eventually will demonstrate “researcher reflexivity” (Braun and Clarke, 2013), which “plays a part in the determination of what [I] can see and can present as results” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 22). As a researcher, the choice of this topic was based on personal interest in fitness alongside my academic
background. I obtained an undergraduate degree in food and nutrition and a Masters of Business Administration which gave this project a fundamental base to stand on.

Being a Saudi woman researching Saudi women positions me as an ‘insider’ researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Insider status embodies both advantages and disadvantages for the study. Also, being a mother of three children – and married at the time of data collection – gave me the opportunity to be fully understanding of my participants who are married and have children, and how their bodies have changed naturally after having children. I also was able to understand the pressure from husbands and in-laws’ families to manage and maintain slim bodies. Merriam et al. construe the pros and cons of insider/outsider researcher thus:

insider means easy access, the ability to ask more meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues, and most importantly, being able to project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study. On the other hand, insiders have been accused of being inherently biased, and too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions. The insider’s strengths become the outsider’s weaknesses and vice-versa. The outsider’s advantage lies in curiosity with the unfamiliar, the ability to ask taboo questions, and being seen as non-aligned with subgroups thus often getting more information. (2001: 411).

Merriam et al. (2001) thus enumerated some of the advantages and disadvantages of both researcher positions. Being aware of these, the researcher should apply the strengths of their position to overcome the weaknesses. Being an insider allows me to benefit from the advantages of this position. During the research process, I had better access to and understanding of Saudi women, compared to a male researcher or an outsider, who would more likely be refused. Reviewing the literature showed that there are many researchers who benefitted from being insiders and gained a deep understanding of their data, such as African women interviewing African women and Asian women interviewing Asian women (Merriam et al., 2001).

Saudi Arabia in particular is a conservative country that has its unique culture. Chapter 1 discussed Saudi cultural background in more detail. Coming from the same culture and sharing the same religion offers significant advantages for accomplishing the aims of a study. Interacting with my participants and understanding their responses was a smooth process which yielded rich, detailed and valuable data. The participants were open to sharing their stories and narrating their successes. Even the participants who could not manage to control their weight provided nuance and synthesis of their feelings and subjectivities.
Conversely, if I was an outsider or a male, I presume women would be less willing to interact and less able to convey their experiences due to cultural and linguistic barriers. My participants knew that I would understand everything they said and were not concerned about misunderstanding social or cultural issues. For example, if I was an outsider, I would not understand the female family gatherings as a traditional norm, and thus the pressure that women feel at such events. Having been in that situation myself, I apprehend their experiences. Moreover, when participants mentioned diet centres or nutrition clinics, I knew what they meant and the difference between these types of institutions.

Furthermore, there are many cultural matters that I queried in order to get my participants to explain them from their own perspective. One of these, for instance, was the change in beauty ideals and how that affected the marital relationship. Further, based on my own experiences, I selected as stimuli cartoons from everyday newspapers which depict women as big, ugly and careless about themselves, especially after marriage. Similarly, being Saudi, I witnessed the emergence and proliferation of weight control institutions. Thus, sharing a cultural background with my participants facilitated communication and encouraged them to open up to me about their experiences. Also, speaking the same language and having a similar cultural background allowed me to foster a good relationship with my participants and gain their trust, especially since most of them could not speak English or only at a very basic level. Being a Saudi woman gave me easy access to attend their female family gatherings and participate in their conversations.

On the other hand, coming from the same cultural background embeds the possibility of over-familiarity or bias to taken-for-granted nuances, which would not be the case for an outsider. Moreover, being an insider meant that the women participants had ‘expectations’ of my comprehension of their narrations and its underpinning meanings. For instance, most of the participants used the phrase ‘you know’, as it is a common phrase used in speaking. This indicated that they took it for granted that I would understand their narration. For this reason, I had to give them ‘floating prompts questions’ to clarify what they were expecting me to know in their own words (McCracken, 1988). This entailed the use of questions such as, “Tell me more, what do you mean? Explain?” On other occasions, when a participant’s response was yes or no, I had to give my own explanation, with which they would then agree or disagree. For instance, Layal had very short answers that I needed to expand upon, as shown in this excerpt from her interview:
Me: Tell me about your experience with dieting.
Layal: I don’t diet.
Me: Have you ever tried to lose weight? I mean, have you ever dieted by avoiding certain types of food or reducing your food portions?
Layal: Umm, maybe. Yes.
Me: Tell me about that experience.
Layal: It was a long time ago, but now I have gained weight.
Me: Tell me about that experience. When did you start? Why did you decide to diet? Has anything changed in your body weight? How did that affect your feelings about yourself?

In such cases, I applied another strategy, which was sharing my own experience trying to manage my weight with the participant. This approach has been used in feminist discourse as a tool to build knowledge (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009). It has been used in consumer research as well. For example, Hirschman (1992) studied consumer addiction, and she shared her own experience with addiction with her participants. This sort of reflection on the study is called “experiential reflexivity”, where the researcher and the respondents share their experiences in order to increase the target knowledge of a certain topic (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009: 669).

During the interviews, especially with those who were less interactive, I shared my own experiences related to the given topic, including my weight control experiences and how I feel about losing or gaining weight. This made reluctant participants feel more comfortable and enthusiastic about telling their stories. For example, when Hanan narrated her experience joining a diet centre, I shared my own story with her. She said, “Yeah, you reminded me, I wasn’t very strict with that diet, I used to cheat a bit – hahahaha”. Sharing my weight management experiences with my participants was thus a useful way to get them to talk more and remember more details. Also, when Nora described her mother’s general situation in terms of clothing and taking care of herself, I talked about my own mother’s situation, which was similar to hers. She laughed and said, “True, all Saudi mothers have this style, I don’t know why. Please let me know when you finish your study!”. In fact, pointing out something I had in common with a participant would increase her comfort level so that she would expand on her response.

Nevertheless, I was aware of the disadvantages of being an insider researcher. Taking the previous example of expressing Saudi mothers’ situation, Nora assumed that I knew what she meant in describing her mother as wearing loose and shapeless clothing. On that occasion, when I talked about my own mother’s style of dress, she confirmed that as being similar to her mother. She used words like “yes … true … right” to express her
agreement and similarity between our mothers. This raises the possibility of my voice “eras[ing] other voices” (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009: 670) and being biased. However, I argue that my strategy for experiential reflexivity was not the main approach in data collection. Rather, I employed it sparingly during the interviews to encourage participants to give more details and expand their narrations. Additionally, it was applied as a trust-building tool between the researcher and researched (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

As an attempt to overcome my familiarity with the culture, I tried to distance myself from the participants. At the beginning of the interviews, the first statement I made was, “assume that I am a foreigner – non Saudi – and tell me about …” During the interview, especially when an answer needed explanation, I kept asking them to think of me as an outsider who needs detailed answers on account of not having a background from this culture. For example, when they mentioned the female family gathering, I would ask them to explain what they mean. Therefore, they gave details about when, where, how, how often etc., regarding these gatherings. Generally, being either an insider or an outsider can yield valid findings, though they are distinct and based on the different lenses that the researcher has used (Merriam et al., 2001). Thus, identifying the researcher’s position and reflecting on it is a crucial step to achieve.

3.7.1 Challenges

Carrying out qualitative research is particularly challenging in Saudi Arabia. One of the limitations of this research study was time. Due to time constraints, I had to complete my fieldwork within four months in total, divided into two fieldwork trips. A month was allotted to participant recruitment and then three for data collection. During the latter period, I managed to conduct two participant observations, as I attended two family gatherings. Despite the fact that these two participant observations yielded rich data and revealed nuances in the families’ differences, I believe if I had a longer period of time to attend more family gatherings, I would have discovered more family differences, and thus more socio-cultural factors and nuances.

Another main challenge was to persuade my sponsor – a governmental institution – to approve my travel for fieldwork. As an official process, I had to apply for the sponsor’s approval to conduct fieldwork within three months, which was their maximum allowed duration. However, the request was rejected many times. Their rejection justification was their lack of knowledge about the nature of qualitative work. In their
response, they asked questions like: How could a PhD thesis have only twelve participants? And if so, why it would take three months to collect data? The view of the institution was that data collection for such a small number of participants could be completed in a mere two weeks. Thus, it was a long process with the sponsoring administration, trying to explain the nature of qualitative research and how it was important to approve the full period in order for me to complete the thesis. It was a stressful experience.

Moreover, my review of the literature from the Saudi context on studies about women’s weight and bodies turned up mainly research within a medical or psychological context. In addition, consumer studies and market research have heretofore basically been limited to large scale surveys and questionnaires. This means that past consumer and market studies within the Saudi context have primarily applied quantitative approaches relying on large samples and surveys. The quantitative approach is not limited to individual researchers, but extends also to the institutional level, such as my sponsor. Therefore, exploring disciplines and consumer research, in particular applying a qualitative approach, remains obscure within the Saudi context. In this light, I can point to the lack of qualitative research and the consequent dearth of deep and rich knowledge among consumer researchers.

As noted previously, participant recruitment was a challenge, particularly as I sought mother-daughter dyads and could often only find either one or the other who was willing to take part. Another was accessing a diet centre and a gym for participant recruitment, also described above. A third was the diaries because not all of the women wrote in them, which meant I had more detailed data about some participants than others. The participants confirmed that they did not like the experience of writing a diary. They found it boring and tiring. For example, when I asked Fayza about her experience, she said, “umm, honestly it was boring. I did not enjoy it. It felt like homework”.

Coming from the same culture, I have to articulate the challenges for me as a Saudi female researcher. As with other Saudi women, I was constrained in terms of leaving the home and getting around outside.

Women are also subject to walis, or male guardians, throughout their lives – usually their father, husband or other male relative. They must have their permission before engaging in almost any sort of activity, from getting an education or job, to simply leaving the house (Worley, 2017).
Meeting participants at their homes and attending their family gatherings required permission from their husbands. At that time, I also had to obtain permission from my (now ex-) husband to attend the women’s gatherings and to go to their homes to interview them. Since women are forbidden to drive in Saudi Arabia, I needed my then-husband to find time in his schedule to drop me off at participants’ homes and pick me up again afterwards. It took me some effort to get that sorted out.

3.8 Ethical issues

As a social research study, ethical considerations are part of the research design (Bernard, 2013). Ethics refers to “moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of researchers throughout the research process” (Edwards and Mauthner, 2012: 14). In order to proceed to fieldwork, I had to obtain ethical approval from the School of Business at the University of Leicester. In the application, I listed the possible ethical issues that might arise during the research process and ways to overcome them. According to Cloke et al., there are five key ethics points to be considered by any researcher: informed consent, privacy, avoiding harm and exploitation, and sensitivity to cultural differences and gender (Cloke et al., 2000: 135). In my participant consent letter, I covered most of these points, and the rest were considered while conducting the interviews.

Handing out the consent letter to the participants, I made sure that they understood the stated points. One of the participants – a mother – was not sure about having her voice recorded, and I replied that the most important thing is clarity. In the informed consent letter, I stated that my participants’ identities would remain anonymous. Also, I informed them that they had the right to withdraw from the interview (and the study) at any point. Moreover, I was careful in choosing the interview questions. I designed them in a way that they would not conflict with the participants’ cultural and religious values. This is because the project’s topic could be considered sensitive because it is related to their bodies. Therefore, I tried as much as I could not to invade their privacy. Being an insider, especially in this conservative culture, helped in that regard.

Ensuring that I avoided harming the participants meant that I had to have a good sense of their responses and act accordingly. I was sensitive to their voice tone, body gestures and their answers to the questions. For example, when I asked one of the participants to tell me about her childhood and her memories of her mother, I noticed that
she was not comfortable and that her answers were short because of some of her memories. Therefore, I changed the subject and tried to redirect the interview to a more comfortable topic. Also, another interviewee refused to reveal her weight as it embarrassed her.

Unexpected issues also arose during the interviews that put me – as a researcher – in a vulnerable position, as “many ethical problems and dilemmas of fieldwork arise from unanticipated consequences” (de Laine, 2000: 17). Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton argue that:

The researchers themselves may become vulnerable due to, for example, the physical environment in which the research takes place, the behaviour and/or reactions of participants and the emotional demands associated with doing the research (2009: 669).

As a woman, I encountered some situations where I was made uncomfortable by a participant’s narration. For example, Fadiah broke the taboo against talking about sex. She explained her sexual life in detail and talked about sexual positions, which made me uncomfortable. This culture is embedded within me, and thus I felt like other Saudi women who feel that mentioning cultural ‘taboos’ would take us out of our comfort zone. I might not have felt the same if I was not from the same culture. However, as an insider, I was shocked and tried to direct the conversation to a more comfortable area.

On the other hand, I wanted to give her the full opportunity to express herself in her own way. Giving details about her subjectivity and how she feels about herself, together with her female family gathering, revealed a hidden part of the culture. Sexuality and its issues exist but are hidden because of being ‘taboo’. Fadiah broke this taboo, and in doing so, shed light on this aspect of women’s lives in a way that was different to my expectations. In addition, some cruel comments from participants were disturbing. For example, one of the participants said, “You’re studying in the UK? Be careful, there’s growing hate against Muslims, especially women, they kill them! Have you heard about the Saudi student who was killed in the park!” I had to reply in an objective way that the media gives an inaccurate picture about the West and that what she thought was not true. I explained that I am safe in the UK, and accidents happen everywhere in the world. These examples highlight the types of unexpected issues that appeared during the data collection.

For the participant observation, the mother or daughter who invited me to their female family gathering introduced me briefly to the other family members as a
researcher guest who is studying in the UK. Unlike the interview, the “gaining of informed consent … can be very difficult to achieve” for participant observation (Mason, 2002: 99-100). Thus, the best way to inform the observed is by verbally introducing oneself as a researcher who is attending their gathering to take notes. This step was important because the observation occurred in a private sphere and was limited to women from the same extended family. Thus, revealing my identity and justifying my presence was crucial. The host – in both gatherings – informed the other family members, and they were satisfied with that explanation. For them, being a researcher studying in the UK gave me a certain ‘prestige’ to be welcomed and accepted in their places.

3.9 Summary

This chapter discussed the research questions and the methodological approach that was taken to address these questions. It also explained the mixed qualitative methods which were used and the significance of their application. The chapter presented the research design, the process of application and the difficulties of the selected methods. It also demonstrated the suitability of applying these particular methods together for investigating women’s body management within the Saudi context. Following the discussion of data collection, I described the procedure and difficulties of data analysis. I then detailed the challenges I encountered as a Saudi female researcher during fieldwork.

Moreover, this chapter presented the philosophical stance of social research, as well as the ontology and epistemology of the researcher. It further highlighted the pros and cons of being an insider researcher in addition to the strategies I followed to overcome the disadvantages of this position. My reflection on the fieldwork was covered in this chapter. I also highlighted the importance of identifying researcher reflexivity in social research. In addition, this chapter addressed the ethical issues of this research context and the techniques used to overcome various dilemmas.

Collecting data via the mixed qualitative methods of interview, diary and participant observation gave the study depth and richness. Interviews were the largest source of data. It was also important to access the other methods of data collection. Nevertheless, the interviews were the arena where I got to know my participants, interacted with them, gave them the diaries and asked to attend their female family gatherings. Having the diaries to complement the interviews and participant observation
highlighted the consistency of each family’s culture. The two family gatherings I attended
contrasted, in a way. Reading the participants’ diaries and comparing them with their
interviews and my field notes of their family gatherings allowed me to more fully grasp
each family’s habitus and thus aspects of building the society and culture as a whole.
Chapter 4: Body Biographies

Figure 12 Map of Chapter 4

→ Introduction.
→ Rawda, mother of family 1 [MF1].
→ Neda, daughter of family 1 [DF1].
→ Layal, mother of family 2 [MF2].
→ Hanan, daughter of family 2 [DF2].
→ Noran, mother of family 3 [MF3].
→ Nora, daughter of family 3 [DF3].
→ Kadi, mother of family 4 [MF4].
→ Fayza, daughter of family 4 [DF4].
→ Hela, mother of family 5 [MF5].
→ Beasan, daughter of family 5 [DF5].
→ Fadiah, mother of family 6 [MF6].
→ Faten, daughter of family 6 [DF6].
4.1 Introduction

This chapter is an extension to the methodology chapter. It offers in depth description of the families. Looking at participants from a detailed perspective was an important step for my data analysis as it helped me to move the analysis forward to the next step and the themes that arose. Blaikie (2003) argues that in order to make sense of qualitative data in social research, we need to understand the individuals we are studying. Investigating women’s bodily experiences can reveal their “struggle in culture” (Brown, 2006: 106). This chapter serves as a base for Chapter 5 which is the main empirical chapter of this thesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Daughter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rawda</td>
<td>Neda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Layal</td>
<td>Hanan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Noran</td>
<td>Nora</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kadi</td>
<td>Fayza</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Hela</td>
<td>Beasan</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Fadiah</td>
<td>Faten</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 4-1 Families, mother and daughter dyads

4.2 Family 1: F1

4.2.1 Rawda [MF1] (Mother of family 1)

Rawda, 56, felt like a unique Saudi woman to me. Compared to the other participants, what distinguished her was her passion for exercising. She is fascinated by her body and therefore she spends time and effort to take care of it. Rawda looks younger than her actual age. She has managed to maintain a healthy weight throughout her life. She is married and has three sons, aged 32, 25 and 13, as well as two daughters aged 34 and 24. Ever since she was a child, she has loved to do belly dancing for entertainment and to maintain her body’s flexibility and fitness. This is in spite of the fact that the concept of valuing fitness was not common at that time. Because of belly dancing, Rawda considers herself different from other women her age. The trend among most women, according to her, is to care about clothing and appearance regardless of body size or shape. Like other women, Rawda cares about her style and appearance, but she cares about being fit too.
At present, Rawda is concerned about living a healthy lifestyle in terms of diet and exercise. Despite having a healthy lifestyle, she still developed type 2 diabetes. In her case, she claims, diabetes is a genetic illness rather than caused by an unhealthy lifestyle. Here, I can see an unusual case because she developed type 2 diabetes, although she lives a healthy lifestyle. This presents a contradiction, as the way that she describes her lifestyle would not make her likely to develop diabetes, but she did. However, she confirms that she has diabetes in her family history, as a result of which she has been subjected to a medical discourse which was common in her family. Dealing with her condition, Rawda shapes her life as an “expert patient” who is aware of the scientific side of her food consumption and diet (Cronin et al., 2015: 1904).

In the past, and before I was diagnosed with diabetes [type 2], I loved exercising, I was actually in love with exercise. I felt different and special … I loved belly dancing when I was young … I don’t remember other girls dancing at that time. It was nice though, because everyone was pointing to me as a good belly dancer. Everyone enjoyed it, I felt special.

Rawda is passionate about exercising, and she has done a lot of it during her life. Even before going to the gym and doing fitness training became a widespread phenomenon, she used to exercise at home. Besides practising belly dancing, she used to buy video tapes and magazines to learn about different exercises. It could be said that she was ahead of her time. Now, she is a member of a gym, and she likes to practise different types of physical activity. In the gym, she spends three hours participating in different activities such as aerobics and swimming.

Because she is passionate about exercising, Rawda has joined many gyms, and she described the different experiences she has had at each of those gyms. The first one was Gold’s Gym. She was very excited about it, so she paid in advance to book her place even before its construction had been completed. However, she had an unpleasant experience with this gym. She compares it to another:

At Gold’s Gym, the first purpose for them is money. They don’t care about the customer’s health as the first priority. Because of their poor customer care I got a neck injury. Also, most of the members there do not join because of [concern for their] health … as much as they are showing off. Unlike Gold’s Gym, Olympics Gym is amazing and I love it. There is a trainer who follows me in every exercise, she takes care of me and they advise me on what to do and what not [to do] so I don’t injure my neck [again]. Also, they track my weight on a regular basis so they can help me manage my weight. I certainly will continue with this gym forever.
Thirty-three years ago, the idea of diet and fitness was common in the West at that time. But because Saudi Arabia was a closed country and less connected with the world, women had not had the notion of fitness as a standard of feminine beauty. In other words, beauty ideals were different to what they have today, which are quite similar to Western standards. Nonetheless, Rawda started her journey of body management by controlling her diet even though the concept of dieting was not known. Rather, it was a self-organised effort. It was a personal idea and attempt to achieve and maintain what to her was an ideal weight. This undertaking emphasises her passion for her body and appearance, which she had long before it became widespread. This fascination with the body made her body ‘the project of her life’, one in which she does not accept failure. She would regard any negative changes in her body as a personal failure, and they would negatively affect her confidence.

This project has mostly been successful during her life and she has lived in that success, consequently growing used to it. When, at a point in her life, Rawda put on some weight, that immediately changed her relationship with and her feelings towards her body. It went from being a point of empowerment and confidence to being a source of shame and disappointment. Therefore, she has been oscillating between these two points throughout her life. Rawda feels very strongly the surveillance of others, and she is anxious about it. Discussing her body history, she describes as her responsibility any changes that happened to her body. The pride she has felt when losing weight or the depression she experienced from gaining weight mean that she can control her emotions, whether positively or negatively, by controlling her weight. This is mainly related to the social gaze and other women’s comments on her appearance:

I love to hear people's compliments on my body, I just love that … I find myself when I am slim. I have to have a thin body to be psychologically comfortable. Once I gain weight, I start to get upset, uncomfortable and desperate, and I ask myself, “Why am I like that? Why is my body horrible?” Then I hate to socialise and see other people because I cannot wear the clothes which I used to wear when I was slim, they don’t fit me any more … Recently, I lost some weight, a friend of mine saw me and immediately said, “You look slimmer!” … I felt very proud!

Regarding her family, Rawda is keen on passing her thoughts and beliefs about health and body image on to her daughters. She always encourages them to look after their diet, bodies and weight. Her concern about her daughters’ health and food is based on two main issues, which are health and body aesthetics. One of her tasks as a mother,
she believes, is to look after her daughters’ health and give them honest and important advice. It is a mother’s responsibility to care for her children, which is important to build the next generation.

4.2.2 Neda [DF1] (Daughter of family 1)

Neda is Rawda’s oldest daughter. She is 34 and a divorced mother of three children, aged 12, 5 and 3. She narrates her body history thus: she has always been slim throughout her life, as the highest weight she ever reached was 60 Kg post-pregnancy. Her appearance is socially acceptable, but she cannot accept it because her body does not match her ideal body image. During her childhood, Neda never experienced any issues about her weight or body. Currently, however, she complains about the same problem as her mother, which is her abdomen. Neda shares her mother’s interest in maintaining a healthy body weight and a fit shape. When she narrates her ideas about bodily beauty, she describes it the same way her mother did. However, she distinguishes herself from her mother in terms of the methods she applies to control her weight:

My weight isn’t too bad, but my tummy looks horrible and it is really embarrassing. I should look after myself at this age; otherwise, by the time I get older it will be more difficult to control my weight, especially after menopause. Now I am 34 and I can see the difference in [how easy it is to] lose weight between now and twelve years ago ... Back then, I managed to lose all the baby weight easily, but now I can tell how hard it is ... During my last pregnancy I ate too much, and my mum was warning me all the time about my risk of developing diabetes. She kept saying, “Neda you should go and have a blood test, Neda, once you add extra weight it will be difficult to lose it”, and so on ... You know, in our culture, people say that pregnant woman should eat for two individuals, herself and the baby, which is completely wrong. This has affected many pregnant women and led them to gain weight ... My mum loves exercising but I don’t. I love horseback riding and only [that] ... I feel free when I go there. I don’t mind going there every single day.

Like her mother, Neda has a rather scientific view of her body and the mechanisms of losing weight. She recognises the natural changes to a woman’s body and how that affects her ability to lose weight. Unlike her mother and other women, however, Neda has a different and unusual way of managing her weight, which is horseback riding. She is fascinated by equestrianism as a weight management technique, as she does not find going to the gym and exercising to be interesting weight management practices. Nonetheless, Neda occasionally feels inner pressure and the need to lose weight to be
more psychologically comfortable. For this reason, she walks, although this is not a preferable option for her. She goes for a walk when she realises that she has put on weight.

Even though she joined a gym with her mother three years ago and paid for a full year’s fees, she went only twice. She does not like the idea of a ‘closed’ fitness studio, preferring open places such as equestrian venues. Neda’s concern about her body and appearance is common amongst Saudi women, especially at her age, as she confirms. Neda asserts that her generation is obsessed with body size and shape, and the use of different methods to control weight is widespread. She believes that the gym, as an institution, has other reasons underlying women’s participation. For example, showing off is a serious matter which Neda believes is ubiquitous at ladies’ gyms. Some of Neda’s friends are members of gyms, and she conveys their thoughts and justification for joining:

These days, women, especially from my generation, are very interested in diet and exercise to reduce their weight; particularly exercise and the fitness studio more than diet. They are very concerned about their weight and body shape … They are not interested in exercising for their health; rather they want to show others that they belong to a particular cultural and economic class by joining these fancy gyms. However, there is a minority who actually join the gym for their body and health.

Besides exercise, the other pillar of weight management is diet. Neda does not believe in the effectiveness and sustainability of going to diet centres as a way of maintaining a healthy weight. These places can work as temporary solutions to lose weight, but she suggests that the best way is to adopt a healthy lifestyle rather than resort to temporary solutions. Hence, she has adjusted her diet and lifestyle to manage her weight because, she believes, there is no one who can manage her weight better than herself.

4.3 Family-2: F2

4.3.1 Layal [MF2] (Mother of family 2)

Layal, 54, is a mother of three daughters aged 30, 28, and 26, and a son aged 24. During the short interview, Layal was shy and reserved, and she was less talkative than the other participants. She classifies herself as having an average body size but being slim according to social criteria and judgement. Society judges women for their body and appearance, but also takes into account their age and the number of children they have. This gives her a broader range of body size normality and acceptance. For instance, if Layal weighs 65 Kg, she will be considered slim according to social judgement. However,
if a 25-year-old woman has the same weight, she is overweight, according to social norms. Fuller bodies are more acceptable for older women than among young ones. Talking about herself, Layal claims to be satisfied with her weight and appearance. She revealed conflicting feelings towards her body. There are certain parts of her body that make her feel less comfortable and less confident. The appearance of these parts is not pleasant for Layal, especially when she attends female gatherings and other social events. She is aware of other women's judgement about her appearance, and she cares about that:

I am happy with my body except these sides. I don’t like them … Three years ago, I went to a dietitian and she gave me a diet plan to follow, and I lost some weight. I committed to that diet only for three months and then I stopped … Sometimes, when I put on 2 or 3 Kg, my daughters realise that and they encourage me to lose this weight. They’d say, “Mum, you’ve never been big before, you have to lose these kilos” … I feel my body is OK, I don’t see myself as a big woman … So I don’t remember I had to follow a particular diet other than the one I’ve just mentioned … I am free, I eat whatever I want and wear whatever I want, though I have to be careful about what I eat to maintain a good weight for my health, myself and for my husband … I don’t like to wear tight-fitting clothing that shows the unpleasant body parts, my tummy and my sides. Well, I don’t like when people look at me and I don’t look perfect with this tummy and sides … So when I go shopping, I try to find something that hides the ugly parts … I like models’ bodies and I wish I had that.

Layal mentions her daughters’ comments about her body, especially when she gains weight. The people who surround her are used to her slim body, so when she adds a few Kg, they tend to notice. Despite her concerns about other women judging her body, Layal is not really interested in dieting or exercising to lower her weight and control her body. She prefers to reduce her portions and food intake rather than follow a particular diet, which she tried once and did not find to be preferable. However, decreasing portion size is arguably a form of controlling one’s weight and submitting to cultural demands regarding body size. Layal thinks the opposite. She presumes that she is free and independent in controlling her body, but she is not. This is evident in her narration when she admitted that she has attempted to lose weight for herself and her husband. Her husband appeared to be her main motivation to look after herself for. Layal is also quite selective with her fashion style. She chooses clothing that hides her belly and sides from the gaze of other women. In this way, she thinks she can avoid negative comments and judgements about her body, as it less obvious to them.

It is very common to talk about weight and body at every occasion. For example, my sisters and I gather every week at my home because my mother lives with me. We talk about daily life issues, such as children,
husbands, school, people and many other social topics. I don’t remember any gathering without mentioning diet or body or commenting on someone who has lost weight and has transformed her appearance.

Layal states that women’s body issues are important and ‘taken for granted’ within Saudi society; there is no question about it. However, there are some contradictions regarding social demands and practices. Women try to control their weight and appearance to fulfil social demands. Women diet, exercise, and undergo cosmetic surgery in order to control their weight. At the same time, they are served large quantities of food and a wide variety as part of social rituals, they eat and sometimes even eat excessively as part of social rituals and societal conventions. It is an important custom for the host to serve food and for the guest to eat this food. It is important both to provide such large amounts of food as a host and to consume it as a guest, in order not to appear rude. Layal is satisfied with her body except for certain areas that she is not happy with. She expressed this contradiction from her own point of view:

For dinner, we usually have various types of food, such as pasta, vegetables or beef stew and so on. Meanwhile, we have snacks, like sunflower seeds, nuts, biscuits, cakes, pastries, tea and coffee … Overeating and serving a massive amount of food is totally a new habit to our society. We still have these gatherings and socialising but with different aspects and more hypocrisy and showing off. People show their financial comfort by serving a lot of food to their guests and they insist that they eat. This wasn’t the case in the past. We were very simple. We visited each other and we served some biscuits and tea and that was fine … No one was overweight or obese, no one. We all were thin … Now everything has changed, the whole society has changed … This has led to women becoming obese and gaining weight … Yes, I can say there is a society segment that looks like that but not the whole society.

Layal has a great belief in the importance of the family as the smallest institution that forms a generation’s behaviour, attitude and identity. According to her, children follow in their parents’ footsteps in forming their lifestyle and habits. Girls develop their attitude towards pursuing a beautiful and slim body basically at home. However, as with most Saudi families, Layal did not pay attention to the quality of her children’s food during their childhood because her children were thin, so it was not an issue for her.

Children will be shaped like their parents and the way they grew up. This will shape what they eat and how their habits will be. I remember when we were children, we didn’t have the choice to choose what to eat. We just ate whatever our parents served us. Now anything goes, I’m not picky in food. But now, look at this generation, they are very picky and they don’t accept everything. If they don’t like homemade food, they simply hang on the phone and order home delivery meals. This new way of eating habits has destroyed our children’s health, as it is full of fat and
empty calories. I think the next generation will be even pickier [and have] less healthy lifestyle.

Layal is aware of the family’s role in forming children’s behaviour and habits. She compares herself when she was young with her children and spots the differences. She refers the difference between her and her children to the difference in their family habits and lifestyles.

4.3.2 Hanan [DF2] (Daughter of family 2)

Hanan, 29, is a large young woman who classifies herself as obese based on her BMI. She has been struggling with being overweight for a long time, and has consequently gone through numerous experiences with weight management. She has tried different types of diets and exercises; however, every time she loses weight, she then regains it. Currently, she is trying to control her weight by following the recommendations of a dietician from a diet centre. She is optimistic about this and aims to lose 20 Kg in one year.

I decided to start losing weight properly. I want to be 52 Kg, now I am 71. So I need to drop 20 Kg. I wish that I could drop it in a year and maintain it. This is the most important thing, to maintain it. And to do so, I have to exercise more, not just dieting at that time because exercise will have more of an impact in maintaining the weight than a diet does.

Due to her dissatisfaction with her body, Hanan decided to establish self-control and lose weight. She is not happy with her current weight, and she does not like her appearance. She has the feeling of being constrained within her body because it falls short of the socially-acceptable beauty standard. At the same time, her weight prevents her from practising other joyful things, such as choosing clothes and fashion that she likes, as she says she cannot find her size. Even if she did, the appearance of that clothing on her would not match beauty ideals; the styles would look unattractive on her. Thus, she has developed a negative feeling of abnormality, which was evident through her articulation of her hate, dislike, shame and embarrassment about her body. These feelings not only stem from her weight, body and appearance, but are also linked to other social issues, such as marriage and relationships.

The problem with being obese is in the movement constraints … This weight has a negative effect on your health and social implications. When someone jokes with me and touches my belly fat, I feel embarrassed … Being obese isn’t a comfortable situation even indoors. I can’t feel
comfortable in casual clothes, such as leggings and a t-shirt because this shows my body’s curves, which look ugly ... The appearance of any obese women is horrible and ugly ... If I go to a female gathering, other women will stare at me once I walk into the place ... That makes me really embarrassed ... I feel awkward and odd, as I am the only one with [such a] body .... Girls stay together in a group except me ... Now I'm unhappy with my weight. I am very, very, very upset about it.

From the perspective of having a large body, Hanan generalised body dissatisfaction amongst Saudi women as a way for her to fit in and not feel odd. She claims that “70% of women are unhappy with their bodies”. Nonetheless, people constantly comment negatively and remind her that she is overweight, especially her mother and friends. Their main point in this regard is marriage. They remind her that she has not found a husband yet because of her body; therefore, she has to lose weight so as to increase her chances of getting married. However, Hanan has a counterpoint on this matter. She believes that looking after her body and achieving a fit body are not about getting married, but rather about satisfying herself.

In the past I wanted to lose weight just to please my mum ... She literally never stops saying: “Look at your body, watch what you eat”. ... My mother talks about my body and weight so frequently, three to four times a week ... She always says, “Daughter, this is not good for you. You joined diet centres and still haven’t lost the excess weight”. ... Some people say you have to lose weight to get married but I don’t believe in this saying, if I did, I’d have lost weight a long time ago. It’s all about me, if I want to lose weight, I will because I want to. No one can tell me you have to lose weight for someone else ... I don’t care about anyone saying anything about me, all I care about is myself. I wasn’t comfortable with my body, then I have to lose weight.

Hanan speaks from the point of view of someone who is constrained by her body and as a result, cannot enjoy the activities of daily life. She describes her movement as ‘constrained’ because of her weight, and she describes the situation of being constrained as something she “feels ashamed of”. This feeling of shame might be a result of the constant criticism she receives from her friends and family about her body. All of her negative feelings about her body, as she states, are based on what society expects her to be. Hanan wants to be slim, but at the same time she is unable to control her love of food. This is evident in her narration, as she explains that when she tries to follow a diet, she forgets and eats normally.

I am totally dissatisfied with my body. I started to gain weight gradually during high school though I was a normal child. I had a pear-shaped body,
but it was within an acceptable range … I graduated and got an office job. I sit at my desk for nine hours without physical movement … I’ve put on weight swiftly … I’ve put on 15 to 20 Kg in three years … I feel ashamed. I always forget. Sometimes I want to follow a diet and I wake up in the morning and I forget that. I go to my office and have a piece of chocolate and, while I’m chewing it, I remember and I say to myself, “Did I say I want to lower my weight?” Sometimes, I throw it away and sometimes I just finish it and say, “Tomorrow I will start my diet” … If my friends or sisters asked me about my current weight, I’d tell them, because I cannot hide my weight … In the past I wanted to lose weight just for my mom … My mom set up an appointment for me with a dietician who evaluated my case and planned a diet for me. Now I am following up with her. I’ve lost 1 to 2 Kg in two weeks. Yes, this isn’t much but I feel lighter.

Hanan indicates that she has a strong bond with her mother. During the interview, she mentioned her mother many times as a person who has an impact on her life. Reading the interview transcript, the impact of Hanan’s mother on her in terms of managing her weight is apparent. As Hanan narrates, her mother is very persistent about her losing weight. This is clear when she says that her mother is the one who booked her an appointment with a dietician. She also said her mother was her past motivation to lose weight. Agreeing with her mother, Hanan believes that family influences children’s habits and behaviour in both their childhood and adulthood.

Well, she has two sizes, one for the top and one for the lower body … Three years ago she followed a diet with a dietician and these sides disappeared. But after a while, she put on weight again and her sides came back again. My point is, my mother should look after herself and her body before asking me to do so … I tell her, “Why don’t you encourage me to lose weight together [with you]? If you don’t do it yourself, how would you like me to do it?” She is my role model, she is my mother, and she is lazy about that. Even if I do it for a month or two, at the end I will stop because I don’t have support from [her].

Reviewing Hanan’s diaries, I can see how following a diet affected the way she feels about herself. For a couple of entries, she was happy, enthusiastic and excited about herself. In the other entries, she was down and depressed about herself.

Today I’m happy, I feel light. I haven’t lost weight but I feel nice. I followed my diet properly and I’m very happy with myself, though I’m annoyed because I didn’t exercise … Today I’m happy, excited and active though I have a problem with exercising. Since I started my diet I haven’t exercised. I don’t know why, it sounds that I’m resisting myself.
4.4 Family 3: F3

4.4.1 Noran [MF3] (Mother of family 3)

Noran, 63, has been married for thirty-five years and has four children: two sons aged 29 and 23, and two daughters aged 24 and 26. She likes to spend her time doing housework, such as cleaning, organising and decorating because she feels her home is her kingdom where she can do as she pleases. Noran often prefers to stay home rather than going out. She claims that body weight and shape are not vital concerns for her. According to her own description – and her daughter Nora’s – she considers herself as an old-fashioned Saudi mother who believes in the importance of children eating, specifically that they should eat more to be healthier. She always disagrees with her daughters about their diets and the small portions of food they take. She feels pity towards her daughters’ thinness because she holds the old belief equating thinness with being less healthy and sees fuller women as healthier. Whatever their body size, Noran always encourages her daughters to eat more to be healthy. She states that she was not concerned about their weight when they were little and did not pay attention to the quality of their food. She only cared about feeding them as much as they would eat.

Noran was not interested in narrating her body history because her body was not a priority in her life. However, she was passionate about describing the past and how simple their life was when body size was not an issue. Noran claims that in the past, the vast majority of the people and families lived a similar lifestyle and had similar income levels.

When growing up, her family did not have adequate financial resources, as a result of which life was quite different and less comfortable than it is now. In the past, she claims, there was only one dress design for her and her sisters; they did not have options to choose from. The typical dress design in the past was long and loose, covering all of the body’s curves and details. Consequently, they did not pay attention to their body details since they were not very visible. Thus, Noran links the lack of concern about body size in the past to the lack of fashion and variety in designs. She expressed the view that fashion and clothing have an impact in shaping body norms and beauty aesthetics.

In terms of managing the body, Noran has a negative perception of the common techniques used to control body size, namely dieting and exercise. She feels that they function as constraints on her. Therefore, she justifies her dislike for exercising and dieting. I asked her whether she exercises:
Me?! [laughing] No, no, my dear, no way. As I told you, post-pregnancy I did some tummy exercises but just for a few weeks and then I got bored. To be honest, it wasn’t an exercise … I feel lazy so I don’t exercise and I don’t have the motivation to do so. I am already old and my health is OK, so, you know, I am fine.

Noran was surprised when I asked her if she exercises. She assumed that I would know that women her age do not exercise. She sees it as an impossible activity to do, especially for an old woman, as she believes herself to be, because managing the body is not feasible for older women and there is no point in attempting to do so. It seems that she has not observed the cultural norms surrounding the body and beauty. She explains this by means of her age. The underlying belief here is that society will not judge older women based on their bodies because they are out of the competition. Noran supposes that women usually look after their bodies to please their husbands or to meet social beauty norms and thereby to please the eyes of others. These two reasons are not applicable for women of Noran’s age because they have nothing to show about their bodies, being at a stage of their lives where they normally stay home. In addition to these reasons, Noran refers to laziness as another reason for not making an effort to manage her weight through dieting or exercise. Noran feels free and satisfied with her body, and no one bothers her about it except her younger son (who is 23 years old), who insists on bringing up this issue. He mentions her body very often and asks her to look after herself and her body.

Noran ignores her son’s comments about her body because she does not take them seriously. She just listens to him without going along with the things he says. On the other hand, her husband has never commented negatively about her body. Noran justifies her husband’s kindness toward her body size and appearance by saying that the obsession with slimness, when it comes to women, is not so common among the older generation. As she says they care more about their spouse’s health than their appearance:

Not all men care about a woman’s body, especially elderly [men] who have been married for a long time ago, as in my case. My body doesn’t affect my relationship with my husband. They don’t make negative comments, instead they make positive ones. He might say, “Be careful with eating sweets because of your diabetes … Be careful about the salt in your food because of your blood pressure.”

Despite everything she has said about her body and how it is not an issue of concern to her because of her age, Noran was not clear about how exactly she feels about
her body. During the interview she tried to express her comfort and satisfaction with her weight, but she acted differently to what she said. She claimed that the only reason she might feel unconformable in public is her clothes, not her body. During the interview, I noticed her discomfort with her body when she hid her stomach with a cushion the whole time, despite wearing a long, loose black dress that hid her body’s curves:

If I attend any occasion, I feel OK about my body. However, if I hesitate or feel uncomfortable, that probably would be because of my clothes or dress, not because of my body … This is my body, my God blessed me with this body, what can I do? Do I have to be depressed all of my life because of my body? Sometimes I say to myself this dress would show my tummy. Then I might feel embarrassed. However, this won't prevent me from [going to] female gatherings or socializing … [There is] no way I'd wear tight-fitting clothing. I just wear what suits my body, which covers my whole body, so I don’t feel embarrassed while sitting or moving around the place, [and] to avoid any unpleasant gaze … When I buy clothes I take my daughters’ opinions; however, we always disagree about what I wear. I like to buy long loose dresses and my daughters don’t like that. They want me to buy more fashionable clothing, which I don’t like … When I see models in the shop window, I feel I’d like to have a body like that, but obviously it is impossible! … I don’t think they are normal people, I believe they have some sort of injection to keep them fit.

Instead of being concerned about her body size and weight, Noran showed more concern about her style and the way she dresses. She was careful about choosing suitable clothes that make her comfortable and less stressed about her appearance. She feels more comfortable and relaxed when her body is less visible and is covered up with long, loose dresses. For this reason she usually opts for a more classic style and modest clothing.

### 4.4.2 Nora [DF3] (Daughter of family 3)

Nora has unpleasant memories about her body and appearance during childhood because she was a fat child. She had a larger body size than other children her age. She could not find her size in the kids section, and had to buy clothes from the women’s department instead. Back then, Nora never realised she was fat until one day, she heard a teacher in the primary school describing her and her sister as “the two fat white girls”. She expressed it as shocking to realise that she was fat by hearing a comment from someone else on her body size. Once she knew that, she started to feel different to other children. The reason for Nora’s weight problem, as she claims, was her mother. Nora blames her mother’s negligence of the quality and quantity of their food as children which led them to gain weight. Like Beasan [DF5], Nora sees her mother as a typical Saudi
mother who lacked sufficient time to look after herself, and thus let herself go. She claims that her mother’s neglect of herself was reflected in her children. She says that her mother never weighed herself and never followed a diet. Similarly, she did not care about her children’s body size either. Nora remembers her mother wearing boring, non-fashionable clothing, and an XL size. Trying to explain her mother’s lack of self-care, Nora said:

I never ever remember my mum looking after herself, she used to let herself go and never care about her appearance. She has been obese all of my life … She has never ever di[ed in her life … She wears size XL, and it was always long, loose and dark colours … I don’t remember my mum ever stepping on the scale to measure her weight. I don’t remember that looking after her body or appearance was one of her concerns. She was quite busy, she had four children and a job, so she didn’t have time for herself … My mother’s stomach became very obvious … I remember my mother did some tummy exercises … But not really an exercise. I’ve never seen mum or dad exercising, never. Also, I’ve never seen anyone in my family going to the gym, neither mum nor dad.

In spite of her memories about her mother’s attitude towards her body, Nora realised during high school that she really needed to reduce her weight, and she managed to do so. This is because she did not want to continue her mother’s lifestyle. She wanted to change so she could keep up with her peers, as she says. This is because Nora is aware of the difference between her and her mother’s generation in many aspects, one of which is concern for body size and weight:

Unlike our generation where everyone cares about their body … in my mother’s generation no one would mention that … So she did not have the motivation to lose weight. My father never mentioned my mom’s body or showed dissatisfaction about her body, never happened. I believe all these circumstances made my mother never think about her body … She doesn’t wear revealing or tight-fitting clothing which shows her curves, because of her age and weight … I don’t know why our mothers are like that? Most Saudi mothers are big [laughing] I don’t know why! Please tell me when you finish this study.

Nora, 28, is married and has two children, aged 7 and 4. She distinguishes herself from her mother and does not recognise any similarities. Comparing herself to her mother, Nora describes herself as a ‘constraints hater’, meaning that she rejects following a particular diet plan or exercise. Rather, she prefers to reduce her food portions and take weight loss pills. She has a different understanding of freedom. She claims that she is ‘totally free’ with regard to her body and does whatever she wants. However, her understanding of freedom is limited to choosing what she eats and does not extend to recognition of other social constraints. She feels that she is independent in controlling her
body as, based on her beliefs, she holds the power over her body. Nora strongly thinks that power and control over the body come only from herself and her own willpower. At the same time, she denies any external influences controlling her body, referring all of the physical and mental efforts to herself without external influences.

Nevertheless, Nora shared her husband’s demand for her to achieve a slim body. Her husband is very picky and heavy-handed with her because he particularly prefers extremely skinny women. This puts her under pressure in order maintain her relationship with her husband, as he has threatened to marry another woman if she did not lose weight (in Islam it is allowed for the man to marry up to four wives). However, Nora does not see her husband as the only reason pushing her to lose weight; the other reason is fashion. Nora is a fashionable and stylish woman who likes to follow the latest trends in fashion. In order to have the best appearance among women, she has to have a slim body to show off. Nora has always had the urge to be thinner in order to feel more comfortable and less embarrassed. She links her comfort, confidence and pride with her body size, as she claims the slimmer she is, the more confident she is:

I don’t feel comfortable wearing tight-fitting clothing because there are some flabby areas I don’t want to show … I wish I was more fit and shapely, for me and for my husband … and for people … Even if I am home by myself, I don’t feel comfortable when I wear tight-fitting clothing, and I don’t like the way my body looks. However, this doesn’t prevent me from attending social gatherings. I try to hide this excess fat by wearing loose clothing … When I go shopping and I see something I like, I buy it even if it was small for me [laughing] in hopes of losing weight and wearing them.

Based on interviews with this family, I observed that both mother and daughter lack the motivation to exercise or do any other physical activity. Nora [DF3] and Noran [MF3] both perceive exercise as a constraint that they do not accept as part of their lifestyle, even if it is a technique to lose weight. Moreover, they both articulated their laziness when it comes to exercising. Noran feels old, as a result of which she believes there is no reason for her to look after her body. Nora, however, claims that her mother did not look after her body or herself even in the past, when she was younger. Both mother and daughter indicated dissatisfaction with their bodies, but only Nora was actively seeking to slim down.
4.5 Family 4: F4

4.5.1 Kadi [MF4] (Mother of family 4)

Kadi, 57, is a widow and mother of four daughters aged 38, 28, 23, 21, and four sons, aged 40, 33, 30, and 18. Kadi is not satisfied with her body because she sees herself as a large woman. During the interview, she expressed her regret about losing her slimness. She emphasised her slimness in the past, which she is proud of now, although at that time, she did not feel pride and not happy with her appearance. She feels that she owned something valuable in today’s terms, but that it was not seen that way when she had it. As a result, she did not feel powered at that time, when she was slim. Kadi was very excited when narrating how slim she was, and she offered proof in the form of several old photographs of her when she was slim. However, she could not maintain her slim body, losing it after eight pregnancies. Kadi tried to absolve herself of the responsibility for not maintaining her former weight. She referred to the various medicines she takes for high blood pressure as the reason she gained weight. She does not seem to blame herself for what others would see as letting herself go. Kadi seems stuck in the past, expressing feelings of regret over her loss of slimness.

Kadi is aware of the changes over time that have occurred in terms of body and beauty ideals, though she did not seem to be eager to follow these changes. In the past, when fuller women were more desirable, she was very thin and her husband wanted her to gain weight. She now has a fuller and larger body although slimness is much more valued at present. Kadi says that family and friends always comment on her weight gain. They point out the changes in her weight and how this has affected her appearance. Her friends, who are all women, criticise her for letting herself go. They claim that she does not look after her body because she is a widow and does not have a man in her life. They blame her for looking after herself when her husband was alive but then letting herself go when he passed away.

Confirming her attachment to the past, Kadi supports the notion that typical Saudi women in the past over-fed their children. When her children were young, she did not pay attention to the quality or quantity of food they consumed, but rather she urged them to eat more in order to be healthier. This notion, she concedes, has affected her daughter Fayza and caused her to be obese. By the time Fayza grew up, it had become less acceptable to be overweight, and consequently, Kadi was not happy with Fayza’s weight:
I wanted my children to put on some weight to be healthier. You know, [at] that time [people had this] belief, but when they grew up, no, I don’t want them to be obese ... During their childhood, they used to order fast food delivery, and this caused their obesity and destroyed their bodies.

In spite of her prior belief in the necessity of overfeeding children, Kadi changed this notion following cultural changes in terms of the appreciation of thinness and the rejection of fatness. Now she encourages her daughter Fayza to lose weight, as being a large woman is no longer preferable.

4.5.2 Fayza [DF4] (Daughter of family 4)

Fayza confirms her mother’s claims regarding the practice of overfeeding children in the past. This has contributed to her obesity and all of the related feelings and body image. She said that she was an abnormal child in terms of body size, and she felt odd compared to other children. She felt bigger and different and not able to enjoy every day kids’ activities. Shopping in the women’s department reinforced her feelings of awkwardness around other children, as she wore adult clothing due to her size. That caused her to feel ashamed and less confident. She internalised these feelings as she compared herself to other girls of the same age. When Fayza narrated her story, she expressed her regret and grief over being a plus-sized child and not being able to enjoy life as other children did. She seemed to feel as she has missed a big part of her childhood. Fayza reiterated that her struggle with weight is due to unhealthy eating habits throughout her life in the absence of her mother’s supervision. The conflicted feelings about wanting to be a little girl like other children but being constrained in a fat body has affected her subjectivity. She felt inferior and psychologically isolated from her peers. For example, she talked about her friends making fun of her at school:

I have felt inferior since my childhood and I hate the scale ... I did not feel like a normal girl. All the girls used to wear children’s clothes but not me. When I went shopping with my mother, I couldn’t find my size in the children’s department. So my mother had to take me to the plus sized women’s [department] to shop for me. This was really shameful and disappointing. I felt ashamed; why can’t I dress like the girls my age? I felt like a woman. The styles and designs were for women, which did not suit my age but I had no choice, I had to wear them ... I remember my friends in the school used to laugh at me because of my weight. They would take my money to stop me from buying crisps and sweets from the school kiosk. They say we do this for your benefit so you don’t get fat. But do you think this would stop me from eating? No! I go back home and eat more and more. I don’t obey any orders regarding my weight loss; I do what I want.
Fayza has been suffering from obesity for a long period of her life. However, the depression about her body started to diminish two years ago, when she lost the excess weight. At the age of 18, Fayza reached the highest weight in her life, as a result of which she decided to change her life by changing her body. Her only thought was to be slim and have a nice appearance like other women. What motivated her to take action and desire to change her appearance and her body was her surroundings. She explains that it was her and two other young women from her extended family who were also overweight. Both of her relatives managed to lose weight and become slimmer, and she was the only one in the family who remained overweight. Socially, many people compared her to other women who were in a similar situation. This comparison reinforced her sense that her weight was out of control and needed to be managed:

I said to myself, “Why don’t I be like them? What is the difference between me and them? If they did it, I can do it”. Since that day I started my diet seriously … Seeing everyone around me losing weight gave me a boost and the encouragement to keep going. No one told me to do so and no one forced me to go to the gym, I did it myself … Sometimes, my friends notice my body change, whether I’ve lost or gained weight and they mention it to me. They say, “You have been dieting since we knew you, when will you start to eat normally?” What I am trying to tell you here is [that] the issue of weight and diet is the centre of my life.

Being a large woman is a very unpleasant feeling and situation. Being compared throughout her life to her other women increased her feelings of inferiority, especially when her mother did just that. She had a negative body image, low self-esteem and was shy and less confident.

Fayza described feeling proud and independent after achieving her goal and losing her excess weight, as she feels she has done it by herself. She emphasised her own effort to lose weight by repeating the word I many times throughout the interview. She denies that any external influence affected her decision to lose weight. As she said, it was all her will-power and her own effort. Fayza thinks she rejects any orders or obligations to control her body and weight. She strongly believes in herself being the only one who can control and dominate her own body. Having lost weight and become slimmer, Fayza feels as if she was released from some sort of constraints. She articulated these constraints by saying, “I don’t look good” or “People will laugh at me”, which means that she is aware of other women judging her body and appearance. As did Beasan [DF5] and Nora [DF3], Fayza [DF3] describes her mother as a typical Saudi mother who was overweight and did
not look after herself. Fayza says that her mother was an ordinary mother who cared about her children but neglected herself.

Since I was 8, my mother had the responsibility to take care of 7 children after my father passed away. I don’t remember that she used to look after herself… She was only concerned about her children … Now my mother is unhappy with her body because she is short and would like to lose some weight.

Describing her mother as “a typical overweight mother” indeed indicates what typical means in Saudi society. When I asked Fayza about her memories of her mother, she confirmed that her mother was ‘ordinary’, which means similar to others in this context. Her mother’s style of dress is modest, which in her opinion, suits her age and body. It can be understood that being a large or full mother and wife was normal and acceptable in the past, or at least it was not an issue or a problem that needed to be solved. This is because society would accept her mother’s full body since she is a mother of eight children, as a result of which a woman’s body will certainly change. However, when the society changed its collective perspective on beauty ideals and norms, obesity and being overweight became undesirable.

Fayza emphasises the suitability of clothing for a woman’s age. She describes her mother as a modest woman who appears to dress according to her age. In her opinion, middle-aged women should be more decent in their clothing than young women. Their standard of modesty can be understood as wearing loose, long clothes which cover most parts of their bodies. In addition, the colours should tend to be dark rather than bright. On the other hand, middle-aged women who break these rules and wear other styles will be criticised by other women for not respecting cultural values and traditions.

Fayza distinguishes her fashion style from her mother’s, though it was quite similar to her mother when she was obese. She used to dress more modestly, covering up and wearing clothing to hide her curves. However, she changed her style when she lost weight. Despite reaching her weight loss goal, Fayza suffers from some flabby body parts, which have made her consider undergoing body lift surgery. She has tried to adapt to this situation and wear clothing that suits her body shape. This makes her feel comfortable and less stressed and less observed. Now Fayza can say that she is satisfied with her new body overall, though there are some parts she is still unhappy with:

  Leggings with a long shirt to cover up unpleasant areas of my body … I
don’t dare to wear short shirts outdoors, I feel embarrassed. Outdoors I
like to wear blouses which are tight up top and loose at the bottom because I have a thin chest and I like to show that and I want to hide my hips. But I don’t like to wear sleeveless shirts because it shows my flabby arms, so I prefer to be more modest. The most comfortable clothing at home is pyjamas ... When I go to any occasion I prefer to wear trousers with shirts or dresses ... When I see models’ bodies I say, “Oh God, I would like to be like them”, I like their body and I ask myself, “Is there any chance for me to be like them? When will I lose [enough] weight to dress like them?”

4.6 Family 5: F5

4.6.1 Hela [MF5] (Mother of family 5)

Hela is a 53-year-old mother of seven children: five girls between the ages of 34 and 24, and two boys, aged 18 and 14. All of her daughters are married and she has ten grandchildren. Hela has been struggling with obesity for over twenty years. She believes she looks older than her real age due to her large body size. She tried to lose weight through diet and exercise, specifically walking. She tried a self-organised diet as well as diets with weight management institutions. Over the course of this journey, Hela lost some weight, but she could not manage to maintain it and she always regained the lost weight.

At age of 17, and before she got married, Hela was slim and weighed 45 Kg. She wore size Small, and she felt great at that time. Over time, and with pregnancy after pregnancy, Hela accumulated weight. She articulated her feelings of guilt because of that, and blames herself for not having the control to maintain her slim body over the years. In a self-confession, she admits that a lack of self-care along with a busy lifestyle contributed to her gaining weight. At the same time, Hela expresses admiration for women who have slim bodies, and she describes them as very lucky. Hela has a negative body image. She emphasises the negativity of being obese and how ‘being big’ makes life difficult. She is conscious of her body image and she has the sensation of self-surveillance:

Obesity is not a preferable situation for anyone ... [It] causes many problems ... Health, personal and social ... For example, snoring while sleeping or getting exhausted while walking and when doing any physical activity, all these are related to obesity. Personally, I can't find my size easily; it is really hard to find clothes [that] fit me ... It is very embarrassing that the plane seat is small for my size, which makes it uncomfortable. When I walk I look ugly, in short [there is] nothing pleasant about being obese ... In our society people would immediately call the obese lady ‘the fat lady’ or that ‘chubby lady’, as if it was her identity or her name. At the same time I feel that a fat lady cannot practise her activities or hobbies freely. It requires more effort and specific
clothing. So she tries to avoid interacting with people … If someone asks me about my weight, I really feel embarrassed and I don’t answer … [I] leave the place to avoid embarrassment … I am uncomfortable with myself because of myself and people around me.

Hela also describes how society privileges and appreciates thinner women over large women. Obese women experience difficulties within society and in their daily lives. She kept repeating the word *suffering* throughout the interview, not only with reference to herself but including all obese women. Hela feels like a slim person who lives in a fat body. She looks at things from the perspective of being slim, and feels that her life would be better in many ways. Hela depicts how great it is to be a thin woman in Saudi society. Slim women, she believes, live easier lives and are much more appreciated and respected by society. On the other hand, she feels stigmatised and degraded by society for being large:

Sometimes when people describe someone obese they would say, “She is very fat, even more than you”, this really hurts.

Unlike other cases where women have encountered direct verbal mentions about their body size, Hela does not have a specific source of pressure, or at least one that she is aware of. Even her husband does not verbally point to her body or criticise her weight. She mentions only her own feelings of inferiority as a factor that encourages her to lose weight and achieve a slim body. She listed a number of social, cultural and health motivations for reducing her body size:

I don’t feel pressure from [any] particular person, but I am looking after myself because these days diabetes is a very common disease among people. I read on the internet and see on TV that most diseases and illnesses are caused by obesity. For example, I’ve seen an interview with a doctor on TV, he confirmed that cancer, high blood pressure, blood clots and so on are caused by obesity … And I have a family history related to some of these diseases, which means I’m at a high risk of developing weight-related illnesses. So when I think about losing weight, it will be because of my concern about the complications that are related to obesity.

Health-based awareness about body size or weight is not only linked to health concerns, rather having a healthy body size makes “us feel good or less worried about how our bodies look” (Shilling, 2012: 7 emphasis in original).

Because my husband is diabetic, he always keeps telling me 'you have to do some physical activities, you are so lazy and inactive this is not good for your health, you have to walk and move your body’.
Here, according to her, her husband does not mention her body size directly, but he expresses concern about her health on account of her inactivity. Thus, her husband does not put particular pressure on her to lose weight. Nonetheless, she interprets his suggestion to increase her physical activity as concern about her health, which means he is worried about potential illnesses that might afflict her. In this matter, she seemed to be one of the few women in this group of participants that felt comfortable and not concerned about her husband’s pressure on her.

4.6.2 Beasan [DF5] (Daughter of family 5)

Beasan, age 23, is Hela’s youngest daughter. She has always been slim, but she is not satisfied with her body. She is married and has a 3-year-old child. Beasan was concerned about whether her mother would know about the content of the interview because she wanted to speak freely. She articulated her mother's lack of self-care, describing her as a typical Saudi mother. There are certain criteria according to which some young women classify their mothers as ‘typical’. According to participants, an example of a ‘typical’ Saudi mother is a teacher who has four or more children. She always wears long skirts or long loose dresses, which is the uniform that is required to be worn at school. Even at home, she rarely wears trousers. She is portrayed as a good mother and a good cook, as a result of which she lacks the time to look after herself.

Beasan tried to reflect on her mother's attitude towards self-care by generalising this attitude as well as her mother's appearance to all other working mothers. She claims that women who are working mothers are always busy juggling their homes, children and work. Consequently, they do not have sufficient time to look after themselves. Beasan interprets her mother's lifestyle as a logical conclusion as to why Hela does not look after herself, but she could not accept why her mother let herself go. Therefore, Beasan developed a negative image of working mothers as women who neglect themselves. For her part, she is expending a significant amount of effort trying to avoid going through her mother’s experience of gaining weight and becoming obese:

When dad gets back home, she doesn’t try to have a perfect appearance for him. I know it sounds harsh to talk about my mum like that, but this is the truth. Now I am trying to avoid all that in my marriage.

Beasan articulated her fear of gaining weight and becoming a typical Saudi mother; for this reason, she is trying to return to her pre-pregnancy weight of 42 Kg. She
is trying to follow a different lifestyle and avoid what she sees as her mother's mistake of gaining weight after marriage and throughout her pregnancies, which is what she is referring to when she says, “I am trying to avoid all that in my marriage”. Based on her perceptions of her mother, Beasan is very determined not to have her mother's body in terms of size and appearance after many years and several pregnancies. For her, if she started to accumulate weight now, it would be difficult to lose it in middle-age, and she would then suffer from obesity as her mother does now. Beasan is concerned about her body, emphasising that it is an important matter in her life and she is harsh in terms of self-discipline. She explains that the diet she is following, the Cambridge Diet, is very low calorie and involves essentially starving the body. The diet entails eating three meals, mainly protein powder sachets mixed with water. It is an unbalanced way of losing weight, but she is highly motivated in this regard.

She found the support she needs among her friends, who help her with controlling her weight. Sometimes, Beasan goes to extremes in disciplining her body in order to attain the body image she sees as perfect and desirable. However, Beasan says that her mother does not agree with this type of weight control, which is based on starving, and thinks it is too tough for her daughter to follow.

I feel different in my body, even my face has changed with this extra 10 Kg … I'm not used to this body; I am not used to this appearance … Yes, my weight is ideal, 51 Kg … If anyone asks me about my weight, definitely I will reply as I am proud of my weight … I am 80% happy with my body … But I don’t like the way my body looks because of my tummy and the fat distribution in my body … Now I am adapting to my new body through clothing. I try to wear clothes that hide my tummy and make it less visible … Though I can find my size easily, no problem with that. But to be honest, an outfit looks different on each body size … My dream is to wear my wedding dress again … The ideal body image I have in my mind is to be like TV actresses, they have really beautiful bodies.

Despite having an ideal body weight according to her BMI, Beasan expresses dissatisfaction with her current weight, naming the specific body part she is struggling with, which is her tummy. Up to this point in her life, Beasan did not have any issue with her body weight or shape. She had what she felt was an ideal body shape and weight, but naturally, it changed after her first pregnancy. Beasan joined a diet centre and followed a strict diet to get back to her comfort zone and to be psychologically comfortable with her weight. She was not psychologically comfortable with gaining weight as she was very concerned about not being like her mother and gaining weight. Beasan did accept the
change in her body shape and weight as resulting from a natural cause. She would feel comfortable and self-confident if she was thin or even underweight. This is because she used to be thin prior to her pregnancy, and that constitutes the ideal body image for her. Beasan defines the perfect woman’s body as the images presented in the media; she says she wants to be like those women, who are, to her, perfect.

My husband always mentions my tummy and how my clothes don’t fit me any more ... He always comments on and criticises my tummy, he says, “You should do some exercises, you should have tummy liposuction, and you should have tummy tuck surgery”.

Beasan is sensitive towards her husband’s comments about her body, although she is much slimmer than him. His comments put additional pressure on her to achieve the perfect body to please him. This might be indicative of the power relations between men and women, or more specifically between husband and wife amongst the younger generation. Beasan did not deprecate her husband's comments, but rather she tried to change herself to receive his approbation. This could suggest the extent to which men have power and control over women's bodies. On the other hand, women are constantly working on their bodies to please their husbands. This situation could also reveal the norms of a patriarchal culture where men have social power and control over women. It is clear here that her husband has the right to exert power over her in many ways. Here we can see an example of men’s influence over women’s bodies and how it affects women by leading them to alter their behaviour to control their body size.

Despite the differences in bodily features between Hela, who is overweight, and Beasan, who is thin, a link can be discerned between the ways they each construct their body image. They both highly appreciate and value slim bodies. They are both psychologically uncomfortable with their current body and regret not being thin anymore. Hela [MF5] could not manage to lose the extra weight; she described feeling like a thin person living in a bigger body. She took the position of being thin and explained how it would feel if she was slim; all her thoughts and feelings are about being slim and healthier. Beasan has a small body size, but her ideal body image differs to her current body, which makes her underestimate her current body. They both have a similar attitude and feeling towards their bodies. They both live in dissatisfaction with their bodies, but in two different ways.

For F5, negative body image and body dissatisfaction illustrates how bodily habitus can be manifested in the constant feeling of guilt and unhappiness regarding their
bodies. They have different body weights, sizes and shapes, yet they are both displeased with their bodies. They link confidence, self-esteem and being socially admired with having a slimmer body. This reinforces my observation of this family's female family gathering. They were more conservative in terms of the modesty of their clothing and the topics of discussion. Hela [MF5] was dressed in a long loose skirt which did not show the curves of her body. Her daughters, Beasan [DF5] and the others, were dressed in jeans and shirts. They served various types of food during this gathering, such as pizza, cake, nuts, dates and traditional food – Aish-abullaham (similar to pizza, with dough on the bottom and minced meat on top). These types of food are not particularly healthy, and contradicted the beliefs they expressed about their bodies.

The topic of diet, body weight and shape dominated the discussions in their gathering. The views they expressed about any issue related to body size or shape were sensible. While they were watching TV, an actress appeared to be much slimmer than she had been, and they immediately started talking about her and speculating about how she had lost so much weight. Beasan said:

Surely she has done a gastric operation, of course she has money and she can afford that. She has really transformed. She looks prettier.

One of the daughters expressed her dislike of attending external social gatherings, that is, other than female family gatherings, where there are more women attending, as a result of which she is seen by more eyes:

Rana: I don’t like to go to my friends’ homes; I get bored that I have to dress formally. I like to go out where I don’t have to take off my abaya (long black robe), like at shopping malls.
Mother: Why? Don’t you have appropriate clothes?
Rana: I do. But I don’t have the body!
Mother: Be grateful for what you have, you are much better than many other women.

Hela complimented her second daughter for having lost some weight, saying she looked slimmer. The sisters discussed how their diets were going, and so on. Another topic that came up in conversation was their cousin, who had had a gastric sleeve operation and lost a tremendous amount of weight as a result. Hela mentioned that her sister-in-law had also done two weight loss operations, liposuction and a gastric sleeve operation:
She didn’t defeat herself; it is not her own effort and willpower. If I want to lose weight, I would follow a diet plan and exercise. I would do it with my own effort … It has been several years since the last time I weighed myself; I thought my weight would be around 90-ish Kg. I stepped on my daughter's new scale, which can measure weight and body fat, and I was extremely shocked; I am 107 Kg, too much, it is too much. It is even too much for my heart and my health … Beasan told me she saw Neda [a family friend] and she gained weight. I was happy because I felt it is not only me who is obese. [laughing]

As mentioned above, Hela [MF5] considers herself to be a big woman based on her self-evaluation and that of other women. She advises her daughters to stop dieting and starving themselves, because she sees their bodies as acceptable. According to the interviews with both Hela and Beasan, Hela never paid attention to her daughters’ weight or body size when they were children. Thus, the daughters did not grow up within a weight-conscious family where they would be taught to appreciate body size and appearance. I noticed that all of the daughters have similar thoughts about their body, weight and appearance. I believe that they have similar thoughts to their mother in terms of body dissatisfaction and feelings of guilt about their eating habits. The daughters were all working on their bodies and trying to discipline themselves to achieve the body they desired. However, this is not the case for the mother. She described how it feels to be thin and to be socially appreciated, but she did not apply disciplinary practices to control her eating. It seems thus that her beliefs are contrary to her practices.

4.7 Family-6: F6

4.7.1 Fadiah [MF6] (Mother of family 6)

This family clearly articulates their extreme love and prioritising of husbands. Fadiah is a health conscious woman; she always looks for new, healthy food recipes to feed her family. Family rituals and spirit are highly appreciated by Fadiah, as she confirms. Also, she believes that these rituals and family gatherings are an old social tradition that should be practised often and never neglected. For Fadiah, her husband is the centre of her life. Everything she does regarding her body, clothing, appearance and food revolves around her husband.

I love myself, I don’t want to suffer from obesity … I look after my body for my health, husband and for social gaze. A husband always wants to see his wife with a beautiful body. He wants to touch the waist and breasts of his wife, but if she is fat, what can he touch? He won't be happy because she will be a ‘mass of fat’. The husband wants his wife to be fit and slim because he wants to enjoy her body more than she enjoys his. In general,
the man wants his wife to be a bit curvy but not fat. The part the man likes
the most in the woman’s body is her tummy. When he touches her and
she has a big tummy that will be ugly.

Based on the importance of her husband in her life, Fadiah believes that woman’s
body is central to her relationship with her husband. As a result, she prioritises sexuality.
She expanded on her response about the woman’s body and linked it directly to her sexual
life. During the interview, Fadiah very boldly spoke about her sexual life, to the extent
that it was uncomfortable for me as a researcher coming from the same background. This
is because going into detail about one’s sexual life is considered taboo. As a researcher,
this took me out of my comfort zone. Nevertheless, Fadiah did not seem to care that this
is a taboo topic of conversation. She talked openly and without hesitation, as if it were a
taken for granted matter.

This might be because she has her own perspective on the issue. She believes that
marital success and happiness for a woman depends on her body and appearance overall
and how she cares about herself, and for her, all these revolve around sexuality. Hence,
Fadiah continually exhorts her daughters to lose weight. She sees them as overweight and
she is concerned about their marriages and husbands, but in her case not so much about
the pressure from their husbands, but how this affects their sexual lives. She narrates a
few stories about obese women in her family whose marriages are troubled because of
their weight. She tried to prove that a woman’s body and weight is a vital issue for marital
success.

Saudi women are very concerned about having the perfect body before
marriage. But once she gets married, she let herself go and never looks
after her body or her health. This happens after many pregnancies and
raising children, or at least this is their excuse. Husbands start asking their
wives to lose weight, as they find sex with them becomes difficult.
Personally, I know a fat couple who suffer in their sexual life because
they are both obese … A woman’s body affects her private life between
her and her husband.

Such frankness did not occur in the interviews with other participants. None of
them linked weight and appearance to sexuality as Fadiah did. As Saudi Arabia is a
conservative country, discussing sexual topics is not acceptable, as this aspect of life has
a special privacy and therefore cannot be brought up outside the family. However,
Fadiah’s family is more liberal in terms of mentioning sexual topics even within their
gatherings. During the interview with Fadiah, I was surprised by the explicit descriptions
of sexual life in her narration:
For instance, when she wears a dress and she has a notable tummy, she will get upset and feel uncomfortable, and she will say, this dress looks horrible on me … If she was fit, whatever she wears will look amazing on her. Clothing … shows and judges your body. If a woman wears a tight-fitting dress, it will reveal her body, tummy, thighs and bum … So once she starts to put on weight, she will develop cellulite while a slim woman won’t get it … A woman’s body weight also affects her sexual and psychological life. If she is obese, this will prevent her from having sex normally, she will have less sexual desire. This is not the case for men, being obese won’t prevent them from having sexual lust … A woman should look after herself for her husband in the first place. This is because he is her husband and lover and he wants to see her beauty and her sexy body. But if she was fat, he would say, “What is that fat body, you look like an elephant”. Women were aware of that in the past. What changed her was the man himself. This is because he looks at her with pure leery eyes, and he wants to enjoy everything about her body. Why do husbands tend to marry another woman? Because of his wife’s neglect of herself. When a woman becomes fat, she develops illnesses and thus she won’t be that attractive for sex. So a husband starts looking for another woman who will meet his sexual needs … Thus, fat women don’t get married at all because no one wants to marry a fat lady. All her beauty attributes are hidden under layers of fat. Lots of obese women I know personally did not get married because of their weight.

From her point of view, Fadiah sees a woman’s body as the fundamental and essential basis for a successful marriage. She has even more to add about how a woman’s body affects her marriage and her relationship with her husband. Fadiah is concerned about other women’s comments and judgements about her body and appearance. For this reason, she has managed to maintain her weight for a long time as she dislikes receiving any negative comments about her body. Such negative comments, according to her, have an emotional impact on a woman’s confidence and body image. She is always keen on hearing positive and pleasant comments about her body. She further says that maintaining a healthy lifestyle is the ideal way to keep a healthy weight and receive positive social judgement. Due to her own practices, Fadiah looks younger than her real age, for which she is proud. She is also trying to impart such a healthy lifestyle on her family, especially since she got married and had children. She is a mother of two sons, aged 38 and 33, and two daughters, aged 34 and 28. Fadiah feels proud for drawing other women’s attention to her body. As it is not common for a woman at her age to be slim – though what constitutes slim is debatable – Fadiah claims that everyone she knows asks her about her diet and what she does to keep her body fit and thin. Despite her healthy weight and her satisfaction with her body, Fadiah is always trying to improve her appearance through the use of different techniques to control her weight:
Throughout my life I’ve never followed a specific diet except once. My sisters and I decided to go on a vegetable soup diet; we managed to keep it up for only a week because we got bored of eating the same food for the whole week. Also, people made fun of us when we went to a family gathering because we didn’t eat with them. They’d say, “Take your food and stay aside”. … In the past I was a teacher. And in the teachers’ community, women look after their bodies because they want to wear nice clothing. When you see a lady dressed elegantly and you can’t do that, you will be dissatisfied with yourself. So women try to control their weight through dieting and exercise. Sometimes women fail to lose their weight for a simple reason, the wrong diet. They want to achieve quick results without thinking about being healthy. So, they regain double what they lost.

Fadiah’s narration reveals the value of food in terms of socialising. Sharing food is crucial and of great value in social relations. Food carries other meanings besides only eating. Going on a diet and not eating with others caused her to be excluded from social relationships, and such exclusion is highly undesirable in Saudi society. Therefore, sharing food and dieting are two contrasting sides of the food ritual, with one strengthening family ties and the other causing isolation from the family.

4.7.2 Faten [DF6] (Daughter of family 6)

Due to being overweight and struggling with that, Faten, 27, always receives comments and advice from her mother to look after her body and lose weight. Fadiah, her mother, continuously reminds her that she ought to lose weight. Faten has had a few experiences with attempting to manage her weight, but they were not successful. At present, Faten is attempting to follow a healthy lifestyle so as to keep up with her husband’s diet. Unlike with the other participants, Faten’s husband is the one who is conscious about his weight, health and appearance, which is unusual among Saudi men. This makes Faten’s situation more complex. Currently, she is facing dual pressure regarding her body; the social pressure as a woman to be thin, and her husband’s pressure to look after her body even more carefully than other women, as he does. Faten narrates her journey and struggle with weight:

The worst decision my mother ever made for me was appetite-enhancers in my childhood … During high school I started to put on weight. I had too much fast food … When I’m upset, I eat for relief … At university, I was opened up to a larger society, you see different girls, different bodies … My first serious attempt to lose weight was right before my wedding when I lost some weight … Before pregnancy my weight was 50 Kg, and it increased during pregnancy to 72 Kg … And it was difficult for me to lose the baby weight. As you know, women’s bodies have more fat than muscles while men have more muscles than fat. If a man exercises twice a week for a couple of weeks, he would reach his goal. But for us
[speaking sadly] we have to exhaust ourselves for six months to lose the weight, and still the tummy won't go away.

Faten gave a quick overview of her history with her body and her weight situation. In her narration, she was an underweight child and this worried her mother. Fadiah tried to solve this problem by giving Faten appetite-enhancers. At that time, they were unaware of the implications for her body. They only realised after a long time, when Faten gained weight later in life. Despite taking appetite-enhancers only during childhood, the consequences did not become apparent until she reached high school. She articulated her dissatisfaction with the whole issue. By the time Faten became an adult, she had to face the implications of being overweight in a society that values slimness:

After having my baby, my brother and my husband used to comment on my tummy all the time. They always say, “Look at your sides – muffin top – when are you going to lose weight? When are you going to lose this tummy?” This makes me upset as they don’t know about the nature of a woman's body … Sometimes, my husband comments on my body indirectly … [for example,] I ordered a dessert from a restaurant … my husband said, “You don’t have to eat it, you are on a diet, aren’t you?” It was really heartbreaking. I asked him, “You always say, ‘your weight, your weight’, what’s wrong with my body?” He replied, “I’m only concerned about your health”. I know he wants me to be thinner and lose weight though he says it indirectly … When my mom sees me eat rice and then pasta, she immediately says, “You’ve just had rice, enough, you’ve had too many carbs”.

According to Faten, she has three sources of pressure regarding her body: husband, brother and mother. The comments and criticism make her psychologically uncomfortable, especially those of her husband. Like her mother, she has a sense of the importance of pleasing her husband and having a perfect body shape. For her, the mention of her food and diet by her husband is something negative which indicates dissatisfaction with her body. Faten realises that this issue is not in her favour, as her husband’s satisfaction with her body is, she believes, vital for marital success. The raising of an issue directly related to her body makes Faten worry about her relationship with her husband.

Demonstrating her current feelings about her body, Faten expresses dissatisfaction with her body, and she is trying to gain confidence and contentment by losing weight. Besides her body image and how she feels about appearance, Faten is concerned about people’s gaze and judgements about her body, especially in female family gatherings. This resonates with Fadiah’s ideas about why women should look after
their bodies and themselves. Faten often compares herself with other women, which makes her feel less confident. Faten articulates her feelings about her body thus:

> I am dissatisfied with my body, maybe because I had a C-section delivery! My height is 147 centimetres and I am desperately trying to lose weight but the lowest weight I’ve ever reached was 55 Kg, and it goes up again … My weight and appetite depend on my mood … I feel I want to lose weight … I wish to wear low waist jeans and T-bag underwear. … When I stand in front of the mirror, I hate myself and I don’t want to see my body. So I don’t like to be naked while changing; I’d rather put my clothes on quickly. I’m really fed up, I’ve reached the point where I really want to lose weight.

Cronin et al. (2014a) argue that “consumers feel as though they are programmed, by organic and mnemonic drivers, to consume food contrary to good dietary composure and are thus fighting a daily and losing battle to conform to majority culture’s ideals of being thin/ slim/normal weight” (2014a: 1573). Despite Faten’s few unsuccessful attempts to lose weight in the past, she still has a strong passion to shed the extra kilos and become slim. She joined a diet club and a fitness gym in an attempt to lose weight, but neither of these endeavours were successful. Based on these experiences, Faten believes that professional diet institutions are not effective in helping women manage their weight, as the results are temporary, not long term. She states that the aim underlying this passion is to have a beautiful appearance rather than maintain good health, even though she has a family history of weight-related chronic diseases. To obtain such a beautiful appearance, Faten has set herself a goal to reach 51 Kg in the next five years. She believes that if she reaches this weight, she will improve her appearance and be more confident and psychologically comfortable, which she misses at the moment. Besides the importance of body weight to her husband and to maintain a successful marriage, female family gatherings are another milieu that are a source of concern for Faten:

> Clothing and gaze, when you go to any occasion and you have to have a slim and perfect body; women will look at you differently. This is Saudi people, [they] prefer beautiful and thin women who are dressed up and confident. They look at her admiringly … When I go to any female gathering I am concerned about women’s gaze. I try to ignore it and be confident. I wear a simple dress or a casual outfit … Though I’d say I am 70% uncomfortable with my body … Because I admit that other girls have PERFECT bodies … What draws my attention to these girls is the food they eat. I was shocked when I saw what these girls are eating. They eat everything, pasta, rice, chips and sweets, but they don’t gain weight like I do. When we start eating, I refuse to eat because I am on a diet, but
my friends insist that I eat with them. I feel embarrassed, and I feel it is more polite to eat with them.

Faten gives special attention to the female gatherings. Attending these gatherings without being fit decreases her self-confidence. She compares herself to other women whose bodies, as she says, are perfect. Faten expressed her feeling of jealousy of other women who can eat in these gatherings without gaining weight. She is trying to be like them – slim – by dieting, though social norms of sharing food in these gatherings as she says prevents her from achieving her aim. This sort of social life which is full of food temptation had been described by Cronin et al. (2014a) as an “obesogenic life”. The obesogenic life that is evident in Faten’s narration is discouraging Faten and other women from sticking to their diet, even though they are expected to be fit which is opposite to what the “obesogenic life” offers.

4.8 Summary

In this chapter I introduced my participants and offered a detailed description of them, including their experiences, feelings and attitudes towards their bodies and appearance and how they managed them. Thus I have told some of their ‘body stories’. The chapter reflected their feelings and emotions about their bodies and thus it gave an insight to each participants’ subjectivity. The aim of the chapter was also to present for the first time the mother and daughter dyads and how bodily practices are thought about and managed within their families. This is important at this point since it also provides a base to the analysis and discussion of family habitus that follows in the next chapter (Chapter 5).

This body-biography chapter, I contend, is an important aspect of this qualitative research, as it gives a deep attention to information and nuances of my participants. Each participant adds a different dimension to the research findings. Because weight management practices are complex, and indeed personal practices and have their own nuances, each woman has a different story to tell. Describing some of what I will theorise as mother and daughter family habitus in the next chapter, and offering an initial account of the type of, what I call, disciplinary practices, can help us interpret how these women construct their positions and dispositions which in turn can help us understand how and why they participate in weight management practices.
Chapter 5: Sociocultural aspects and women’s bodies

Figure 13 Map of Chapter 5

- Introduction.
- Who is fat?
- Shift in beauty ideals: Body size in the past, from mothers’ perspective.
- Contemporary women’s body ideal.
- Media and globalization.
- Marriage and men’s demands.
- Male gaze and the husband-wife relationship.
- The son-gaze.
- Surveillance and judgement.
- “Women dress for women”: Surveillance between women.
- Body shame.
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- Self-surveillance, the mechanism of social power.
- Disciplinary practices, Dieting and exercise.
- Technologies of the self.
- Diet and exercise.
- Apparel. Clothing and fashion.
- Summary.
5.1 Introduction

The literature review chapter discussed the theoretical framework for this thesis, which was devised to answer the research questions. In this chapter, I build my interpretation of the data. Actually, this chapter is an interpretive piece where my voice as the researcher is as important – as valid – as the participants’ interpretation and voice, and this has been highlighted in the methodology chapter. My voice as the researcher is presented as part of narrating the analysis of empirical insights because they are inextricably linked to my own experiences and observations. The empirical and theoretical focus of this chapter draws on Foucault’s notion of power within everyday life, from which I can understand women’s subjective formation and their behaviour. Together with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus – in the next chapter - I can illustrate the family’s role in forming the women’s subjectivities and thus their practices regarding managing their bodies. Moreover, I demonstrate the socio-cultural factors that influence women’s participation in weight management practices. I seek to explore women’s experiences and motivations for managing their bodies within their daily lives. Furthermore, I aim to find out women’s reflection on their subjectivity. In that sense, I am investigating beliefs that are taken for granted and thus they form their daily life practices, thus discussing the data collected through fieldwork in the light of the theoretical framework.

The first section of this chapter deals with the data’s indication of cultural change in beauty ideals through generations. Interviewing middle-aged mothers who witnessed a social and cultural shift revealed the changes in many aspects of beauty. Data extracts show a significant shift in beauty ideals and norms. Following that change, the data illustrate a change in relationships between men and women due to the shift in cultural beauty ideals, specifically relating to men’s demands for women’s beauty. The second part deals with the theme of surveillance, which was readily apparent in the data. Surveillance among women, and self-surveillance will be discussed.

The final section of this chapter discusses the disciplinary practices that women apply to control their bodies. It describes how women see their bodies as manageable and malleable entities that can be formed and re-formed in a way of their choosing. Weight management practices such as dieting and exercise were proven to be ways to manage their bodies. Further, this section gives an insight into technologies of the self that contribute in controlling women’s sensation about themselves.
5.2 Who is fat?

In this study, the words ‘fat’, ‘overweight’ or ‘obese’ have been used to describe abnormal body size. In other words, this is the body size that within social norms is considered big. Participants have defined themselves as fat or normal based on their BMI – body mass index – or the way they feel about themselves or other people’s comments to them. Notably, when they mention fat or overweight they mention it in a negative way. Therefore, the use of fat, overweight or obese will be as a description of ‘big’ bodies. These words will appear more frequently in the upcoming sections.

5.3 Shift in beauty ideals: Body size in the past, from mothers’ perspective

Saudi Arabia is one of the most rapidly changing societies in the world in all aspects of life. It has shifted swiftly in economic, cultural and social ways. Following the Western trend of idealising women’s bodies and beauty, Saudi women in contemporary society are ‘obsessed’ with their bodies and with fitness (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Chapter 2 describes how, in modern societies, understandings of the body have developed and shifted over time from its being treated solely as a biological entity to a social one. Thus, investigating the social body yields insight into the culture of a given society. In this section, I will explore the data to discern the cultural shifts that influenced women’s values regarding beauty ideals and therefore their weight management practices.

As evidenced in the data, women’s beauty ideals, criteria and standards are one of the aspects that have changed between the past and present. This change has contributed in changing women’s definition of their subjectivity, as will be explained later in this chapter. Middle-aged women are the mothers who participated in this study and were able to identify the clear difference between now and then in terms of women’s bodies and beauty ideals as well as social preferences. Participant Hela’s (52, mother) comment clarifies the change in society’s beauty values among two different generations:

Mothers – who lived in both periods – are from a generation who when they were young women understood and experienced the status signifier of a larger female body. Now, they are middle-aged and experience the status of the body as thinness.
In the past, 30 to 40 years ago, it was rare to see overweight people … I think it was less than 1% of the society that was obese. There weren’t obese people. I presume anyone who was obese at that time was suffering from some sort of disease, but in general, obesity didn’t exist in society. Thus, no one was looking for thin ladies, as people had normal bodies, nothing different. The body was not a sign of beauty and it wasn’t an issue or matter, they cared more about facial features, a fair skin tone and hair quality.

Hela reflects a picture about the society in the past in terms of physical body appearance and preference. The first aspect she mentions is body size. As this interview took place in the present, Hela describes the past based on present values. She starts talking about body size in narrating the past, indicating that body size is the most important criterion for women in contemporary society. However, I presume that if I interviewed her in the past, she would not have mentioned body size as an issue, rather she would have raised/spoken about other considerations that were present at that time. Exploring how the society was in the past, Hela construes that obesity did not exist in the past because there was no body focus. This notion was also evident in Noran’s (56, mother) argument that signifying body size and its related practices was not an issue:

In the past, no one gave specific attention to a woman’s body. A man would marry any woman regardless of her body or appearance. He was looking for a good housewife who can manage the house and look after the children.

Hela narrates her bodily experience when she was young:

I was slim back then, though I did not feel anything different. I mean nothing was special about that. If only I had my previous body now, uhhh it would be amazing. I would be proud to have that slim body. I guess I would be beautiful too. Unfortunately, I’ve put on weight and lost that body … I wish I could have my previous body back.

Hela reviews her experience in the past where a ‘slim’ body was not a beauty ideal at that time; therefore, she did not achieve the beauty ideal. At that time, Hela did not feel proud for having a slim body because her body size was common among women at that time. Back then, slimness was not a beauty ideal, rather fuller women were more appreciated. Applying current ideals on the past, Hela shows regret for losing ‘past normality which became a contemporary ideal’. This indicates the dimension of cultural and social changes that have been narrated by the same person throughout two different periods.
Then, a fuller body was more desirable. Kadi (57, mother) says: “In the past, a full and round woman was more preferred and desirable as her body shows her health, beauty and sexiness”. Fadiah shares that notion when she proudly narrates how she was in the past:

I was a chubby girl and they used to call me the ‘white duck’ [laughs] I was pretty and everyone appreciated my appearance. I was two years younger than my sister though I looked older because of my body size … but no one was thinking about their body.

Fadiah showed her proudness for having a full body in the past when that body was appreciated while Kadi’s body was required to put on weight to fulfil the beauty ideal requirement. Kadi shares a similar notion with Fadiah but from a different context. Kadi says, “In the past I was very thin, never suffered from being overweight … When I got married, my husband asked me to put on some weight because I was really thin and men preferred fuller women better than slim ones, but it was OK”. The two previous quotations reflect similar issues from two different perspectives. In that sense, being slim was not fashionable and was not a desirable beauty attribute because the vast majority of the people were slim. Some participants confirm that in the past, husbands of slim women wanted them fuller after they got married as a fuller body was considered a ‘sexy’ body. This positions slimness as a non-relevant attribute that was taken for granted. Despite their narration, women’s bodies were not the centre of concern.

Participants agree on the difference in ideal body size between the past and present. The ‘rarity’ of fuller bodies made them more desirable and appreciated; thus, it became a cultural beauty ideal. In Kadi’s case, her husband wanted her to gain weight to meet the beauty ideal, which is the opposite of contemporary ideals. Kadi’s narration shows that despite being slim in the past, she did not feel empowered at that time; rather, she had to take action to achieve the opposite. Narrating the past through current eyes, Kadi articulates her pride in being slim in her youth because it is today’s ideal, even though it was not ideal at that time. During the interview, she wanted to prove her slimness in the past by showing me her photos. Kadi’s story emphasises Hela’s point about the change in beauty ideals from the past to the present. Being slim in the past was the norm. Consequently, fuller women were more desirable than others. In other words, Kadi and Hela both had big body sizes, though they did not achieve the ideals; they were slim at a time when beauty ideals favoured fuller women and they are ‘full’ at a time
when society appreciates slimness. Therefore, they have always felt at odds with the contemporary body ideal and morality.

To highlight the contemporary situation, participants had to show the contrast between past and present and map out the difference. Asking participants to narrate their body stories, the contrast arrived naturally as part of their storytelling in the interview. Comparing two different ideals in two different generations, Hela tried to show the distinction by giving an example of a fat but pretty lady and an ‘ugly’ slim lady. In that example, she showed that what was considered beautiful in the past is not considered ideal in the present. Hela is telling us that women who fulfil current beauty ideals, namely a slim body, get social appreciation, and as a result, they become confident, regardless of the level of their other beauty attributes, such as skin tone and facial features, which were more prized in the past. This suggests that achieving a slim body moves from the level of only being a beauty ideal to becoming a source for women’s empowerment. In other words, fulfilling contemporary society’s ideal plays a role in forming women’s subjectivities and the way they feel about themselves. Based on that shift in beauty ideals, Hela argues that the beauty standard has become an achievable option for everyone due to the availability of methods to lose weight.

5.3.1 Contemporary women’s body ideal

Recent studies emphasise that the average body size in contemporary society is larger than it was in the past. Memish et al. (2014) revealed in their study that out of 10,735 participants in Saudi Arabia, 33.5% of the women were obese, compared to 24.1% of men. This indicates a contrast issue. Because average body size among society has enlarged, women have moved further from the body ideal. For example, Layal (55, mother) points out this change:

No one was overweight or obese, no one. We all were thin … Now everything has changed, the whole society has changed. Women become more obese and overweight … I can say it is a social phenomenon among a considerable number of people.

Her quote indicates that women in contemporary society have moved far from the social ideal at the time that maintaining a slim body is a ‘requirement’. This justifies my participants’ claim about why slimness is desirable and being pursued as well as that the number of obese women is increasing at present, while women’s beauty ideals are
changing too. Likewise, Hela emphasises the change in average body size and the consequences of this change:

Now it is totally different, the issue [weight control] is very common and popular; you can see it and hear it everywhere. As proof of that, you can see how diet products, diet centres and gyms have massively increased in the past few years ... Now, the trend among women of all ages and generations is to reduce their weight, body size and to look after themselves. They use every possible way to lose weight no matter how risky it is for their health. They refer to diets, exercise and gastric operations and so on. All these methods have become very popular within the society.

In the above quote, Hela reviews the current social situation by saying “now it is totally different”. She draws on the past ideal and morality to distinguish what is different. Because she lived in a time where the body was not an ideal to be focused on, she can pinpoint the shift that occurred. She used the indications among society to tell us how that change in body ideals affected the whole society. Hela mentioned the example of the prevalence of the methods of weight control as a sign of the change of the average body size among society; and the shift in body and beauty ideals. Hela construes how women deal with these new ideals by following various methods like dieting or undergoing gastric operation. She adds the social morality of appreciating slimness and locating women within different social spaces based on their bodies.

Saudi society looks at a slim lady respectfully and admiringly regardless of her level of beauty, skin tone, hair and other beauty attributes. As long as she has a beautiful body, this gives her empowerment, support, authority, braveness, confidence and beauty. I am telling you that based on my experience and interaction with my society. For example, I’ve seen a very beautiful lady, who has a very beautiful face and nice skin tone but is obese. She is totally UGLY in society’s view because her weight has hidden all of her beautiful attributes. In contrast, you can see a lady with much less beauty or I can say an unattractive or even ugly lady, but fit, [and she] would gain society’s admiration everywhere, such as at gatherings, weddings and special occasions.

Hela describes contemporary beauty ideals from a ‘body’ lens. She argues that because the change of society’s preference, beauty ideals are not parallels with the past ideals. Qualities that were appreciated in the past are not considered at present; skin tone and the beauty of the face are not major beauty criteria in contemporary society. Interest has shifted to other beauty ideals, especially becoming slimmer. In a Foucauldian sense, this high appreciation for slimness as a beauty ideal means ‘slim’ women are more empowered and supported because of their bodies (Tischner and Malson, 2008).
This raises another distinction between the past and present in terms of achieving beauty ideals. In the past, beauty was limited to those who are naturally beautiful, as face, hair and skin tone are features largely out of the individual’s control. In other words, this idea of being natural/born with beauty – not controllable – is now shifting to managed and controllable beauty that is not necessarily linked with your born body characteristics. On the contrary, at present, beauty is linked to more controllable, achievable characteristics such as slimness, which for Hela could be reached by applying certain practices such as “diet, exercise and gastric operations, and so on”.

Hela’s narration of the shift in social preference of beauty ideals was a common experience that is evident in other participants’ narrations. For example, Kadi has similar sensations about this change: “Nowadays, the vast majority of people, both men and women, prefer slim women and I am one of them … No one is satisfied with their body. No one is happy with obesity, who likes to be fat?”. Likewise, Rawda (56, mother) reflects how society views beauty and thus the ways people are pursuing to achieve slim bodies: “Beauty is in slimness thus the vast majority of Saudi women are dissatisfied with their bodies. This drives them towards cosmetic surgeries such as liposuction, belly tuck and gastric sleeve surgery”. Supporting the clear presence of a cultural shift in all the participants’ narrations, Noran spotlights the change in beauty ideals. She states:

Now look at the new society, everything has changed. Men are looking for a slim and fit lady who can please their sight … Now all women are concerned about slimming and toning their bodies … If you are overweight, no problem! You can undergo a gastric operation and you will be slim! If you want to reduce or increase any part of your body, also no problem, there is cosmetic surgery that can help you with that.

Describing the social change, the ‘men’ theme was present in her narration. Noran mentions ‘marriage’ and men as a standard to measure the change in women’s beauty ideals. Mentioning marriage and binding it with beauty ideals indicates the significance of marriage as social status within Saudi society. Women are concerned about the male gaze and thus they are keen to feel wanted by men in order to get married. This is because women’s bodies are an ‘issue’ that matters for men when they seek a wife. This means that in contemporary society, it is not acceptable to be overweight (Bordo, 2003) and there are many available practices that help women to manage their bodies. These newly presented practices have not been available in the society in the past. Thus, they form part of a cultural shift for beauty ideals. The following section describes the role of the media in cultural change in Saudi society.
5.3.2 Media and globalisation

In connection with the previous section, participants confirm the significant role of the media as a factor that contributes in changing social preference of beauty ideals. For instance, Fadiah claims that globalisation in the form of the fashion and beauty industry has affected Saudi society:

Twenty years ago, women didn’t have that notion of taking care of the self … This idea was common in Western countries … I used to travel a lot to the UK and Europe and I saw people there … Now, it is a generation of technology. There is a revolution in beauty ideals and standards because of a revolution in fashion designs; there are lots of amazing, elegant designs which entail a fit body to wear them … There is a new openness to the world, via TV and internet; thus, men can see a variety of things and even ‘naked’ women.

Fadiah attributes the change in beauty ideals as a consequence of the development in fashion design and the beauty industry. This change requires women to achieve slim bodies in order to correspond to the new requirements. Globalisation and Westernisation are key factors in this change in media’s representation of women in the Saudi context. Due to the discovery of oil in the region, Saudi Arabia became connected to the world, and people were able to travel abroad by the 1970s (Long, 2005). Fadiah mentions travel and openness to the West as factors that allowed her to see the Western culture. In this sub-theme, Fadiah highlighted two main issues: the way women receive these changes and how men perceive these new ideals.

Over time, elements of Western culture have been adopted by Saudi society in the form of fashion designs, technology, the internet and media. Media and globalisation are often considered as two sides of the same coin due to their overlapping functions (Rantanen, 2004). Having open access to other cultures through media channels, societies adopt new ideas, ideals and moralities. Under these circumstances, the Western image of women that is presented in the media has contributed in altering the standards of beauty ideals in Saudi society. Slim women who appear in the media, according to Fadiah, have an influence on Saudi women’s beauty ideals by influencing men’s tastes and preferences. All of these factors played a role in changing men’s point of view towards women’s beauty.

Nora (28, daughter) has a similar sensation about the role of the media in their daily life, of how women behave according to a reflection of the images presented in the media: “I think the reason for this passion [pursuing slimness] is TV and new social media.
Women see all these images and try to copy them”. Likewise, Kadi sees the issue of slimness as being linked with the media. She says: “I think the interest and concern about fitness and slenderness is high. Women watch TV and copy their friends which makes them desperately want to be fit and slim”. These participants’ narrations give a sensation on how women alter the way they define their subjectivities between past and present. Indeed, the media has an important role in women’s subjectivity and thus in their behaviour (Giovanelli and Ostertage, 2009). In other words, the media has been found to be a key factor in changing women’s body image, and, therefore, related bodily practices, such as weight management. Giovanelli and Ostertage (2009) remark that women’s application of self-regulating practices is partially developed by the media. This influence is not limited to how women see themselves, it rather forms how men see women’s beauty ideal. The next section investigates the influence of the media in shaping men’s perspective of women’s body ideal.

5.3.3 Media and globalisation from men’s perspective

Listening to participants’ experiences, they add another dimension to the role of the media in changing social beauty ideals. For example, Rawda illustrates the role of media on changing women’s beauty ideals:

Watching TV and seeing slim women such as fashion models, actresses and celebrities, changes people’s minds. Men try to find wives similar to what they see or they ask their wives to lose weight and match the ideal woman’s image. So, women try every possible way to achieve this ideal image, which is hard.

Broadcasting new media channels with the new and westernised ‘ideal’ has – over time – influenced the whole society. She puts emphasis on the role of the media and globalisation in re-constructing the way that men see women. In other words, media and globalisation have not just impacted what women think about beauty, they have also affected what their men think. The huge appreciation for thinness and discarding fatness in the media has been adopted among Saudi society. The transferred image of Western ideals has been appreciated by men. Harrison (2003) argues that men are influenced by the body ideal presented in the media thus it alters their preference of women’s bodies to appreciate slimness.

In that sense, men internalise this image as a desirable beauty that they want their wives to achieve. Rawda mentions men’s preferences because she thinks men’s opinions
and demands on women’s bodies are essential and taken for granted by women. It is worth repeating here that in the previous section participants showed how the slim female body was not an important issue in the past. Rather, society preferred fuller women. Rawda’s claim is a common belief among participants. Another participant, Nora, also construes the change in women’s beauty ideal through men’s preference and the way they think about their wives:

The man sees loads of pictures, images and photos of beautiful women through TV and social media. So when he returns home, he finds a beautiful lady waiting for him, who doesn’t look much different to what he sees in the media and outside the home. This prevents him from thinking to marry another wife or to cheat on his wife. I see that the husband is a motivation for the woman to look after herself and maintain a beautiful body just so as to keep her husband and family.

Layal also shares that notion. She believes that men have changed preferences on women’s bodies and appearance, now being fond of slimmer bodies:

Now, men like thinner ladies. I mean not extremely thin, but fit … Because of globalisation, men are affected by this thinness ideal. They come home and compare their wives with the images they see. Thus, a woman should be clever and look after herself to keep her husband’s attention … We live in a world full of images. Men see perfect images everywhere on TV and the internet … After the exposure to all these new images and pictures, men are affected by what they see on a daily basis … I think a man just gets upset and unhappy if his wife is overweight.

Overall, participants confirmed the significant shift in women’s beauty ideals among Saudi society between past and present. ‘New’ beauty ideals in the media which are basically thinness have been adopted by Saudi society. Slimness appreciation has changed the whole society. Both men and women are influenced by that. Media as a ‘carrier’ for globalisation has a significant effect on societies in different aspects (Hafez, 2013). Over time, these changes entailed changes in the way in which women feel about themselves and practices related to their bodies and weight. Shifting the beauty ideals from facial features to the body, and from a full body to a slim body was evident in their narrations. In the past, men preferred fuller bodies, though their preferences have changed to slimmer bodies now. Therefore, the criteria and ideals in wives that men are looking for have changed. Next, I will discuss women’s body ideal and slimness and its relation to marriage chances and starting a family.
5.3.4 Marriage and men’s demands

Marriage is a major social matter. It takes its importance from the significance of the family as the smallest social unit, as Saudi Arabia is a “family-structured society” (Long, 2005: 18). In that sense, getting married and maintaining marriage is prominent in this society. Linking this fact with men, we can see how fulfilling men’s demands is crucial for the marriage institution. As has been discussed previously, the media and globalisation have influenced how beauty is defined by both men and women. As marriage in Saudi society is arranged, Al-Munajjed states:

Marriage in Saudi Arabia is a social rather than an individual proposition. It is a communal affair, an affair, like an alliance between families, a consolidation of family ties. Feelings of love are expected to develop after marriage, not before … Thus marriages are parentally controlled (1997: 79).

So the only way that a woman can get a man’s interest for marriage is by pleasing his sight and fulfilling his demands. In the previous sections I have presented how the criteria in men choosing wives have changed between past and present, as well as how men’s requirements for their wives have changed. Thus, this cultural change has not only influenced the beauty ideal and preferences, it also has an impact on the mechanism of getting married and maintaining this marriage. Starting with finding a wife, the participants in this research construe that women’s bodies play a significant role in increasing or decreasing the chance for women to get married. For instance, Layal is looking for a wife for her son, a slim and beautiful woman. She narrates:

This didn’t exist in the past. Men used to look for a good lady and the body wasn’t a feature or priority that a man was looking for. All that they cared about was that the woman came from a good family so she could be reliable to have and raise his children … Now I am looking for a wife for my son as he’s seeking a thin, beautiful lady.

Layal clarifies the distinction between past and present in terms of finding a wife. She shared her personal experience of looking for a wife for her son. Her son wants a slim and beautiful lady. This means that even if she finds a woman who is beautiful, it would not be adequate in the case that she is not slim. Another supporting story was found in Kadi’s interview. She narrates her sons’ stories of marriage and choosing wives as they were looking for fit women:
When my three sons wanted to get married they were looking for slim and fit wives; they never thought about any overweight lady because, to be honest, they don’t look attractive. My daughter-in-law now has 3 kids and she has put on some weight, she is trying hard to lose it because my son keeps telling her to do so … Most of the husbands criticise their wives if they put on weight and will say, “When we got married you were slim and now you are overweight”.

Likewise, Rawda shares her experience of searching for a wife for her son. She reflects the qualities men are looking for in their future wives. In her words:

The vast majority of men like slim women and my sons are part of this majority. When I was searching for a wife for my son, he insisted to find a slim wife. Sometimes, I see a pretty girl but not slim, say average or slightly above average. He goes to see her, then he doesn’t like her. He tells me, “Mum, I told you to find a slim one, like my sisters. Not just anyone”.

Limiting the chances of marriage to the physical body has moral and emotional dimensions. Neda (Rawda’s daughter) also mentioned this point in her interview. She narrates:

After an arranged agreement with the lady’s family, my brother had engaged in preparation for marriage. Several months later, my brother had changed his mind and does not want to continue with this marriage. The reason for that, as he said, was her body! Yes, her body was flabby and not toned – especially arms, thighs and breasts – and he believes that when she has the first baby, she will be overweight. He also saw her mother and her married sister who are overweight. He said she would be like them after having kids.

Neda’s narration is a clear example of how a woman’s body can determine her future. Moral evaluation is clear in this case. Being very concerned about the wife’s body is a matter that reconstructs how a family is established. The value of starting a family has moved away from giving accounts of qualities that were considered to be important in the past in order to focus on the body. Being from a good family and being a skilful cook are not contemporary marriage criteria, as they used to be (this will be further discussed in the following section). A woman’s body has become a critical element for marriage and establishing a family. Here, I am not arguing that society has totally moved away from finding certain qualities in a future wife. Rather, I want to shed light on the enormous weight and focus that is given to a woman’s body in relation to marriage.

The notion of being concerned about flab-free women bodies has been common in America since the 1990s (Bordo, 2003). Nonetheless, this attitude has been adopted in Saudi society recently. This notion, as Bordo (2003) argues, does not concern only
weight, but also emphasises a flab-free and excess-free body. For instance, when Nora lost weight, her brother commented on her body: “He says that my body is unhealthy even though I’ve lost weight. He says, show me your belly, you are happy you’ve lost weight! Your body is flabby!” Here, I argue that women – to some extent – are becoming more sexualised, commodified and objectified. Turning a blind eye to how women feel about themselves due to men’s demands has moral considerations. This was evident in Neda’s narration when her brother broke up with his fiancé only because of her body. Hence, linking women’s body weight with marriage has been found in participants’ stories and experiences. It plays a role in maintaining the couple’s relationship, hence the stability of the family.

5.3.5 Male gaze and the husband-wife relationship

Men demand slim women’s bodies not only for finding a wife and starting a family, but also in order to maintain their relationships with their wives. Shedding light on the aspect of husband-wife relationships is particularly important within Saudi society. This is because Saudi Arabia is a religious country in which the family is the basic unit. Thus, establishing and maintaining a family is one of the most important social issues in Saudi society. As family structure has changed, the nuclear family has become the ‘dominant mode’ of social construction in contemporary Saudi society (Al-Rasheed, 2013: 254). This puts extra emphasis on the husband-wife relationship as the core relationship for stability in this society.

As the data demonstrated, husband-wife relationships are another aspect of cultural change that is related to women’s bodies. That husbands criticise their wives for gaining weight naturally after having children is evident here. In that manner, Bordo argues that women “represent the temptation of the flesh and the source of man’s moral downfall” (Bordo, 2003: 11). These demands that implicate moral evaluation locate male gaze as a ‘reason’ for the participants’ changed beauty ideals which was not there in the past. Kadi depicts the typical situation for couples:

The man looks at other ladies and notices their bodies. Thus, I believe women should look after their bodies to prevent their husbands from looking at other ladies just because you are overweight. However, if the wife looks after her body and her husband has noticed any other slim lady he would say; my wife’s body is similar to what I see, no need to look! I believe this is an important issue especially these days when the world is open and men can see everything.
Kadi states the male gaze by saying ‘look and see’ is a contemporary issue that was not there in the past. She describes how a man looks, sees, compares and evaluates his wife in accordance to what is considered the ‘ideal’ body. This comparison puts women under constant pressure to please their husbands. It also increases the blame on them by other women. In that sense, women feel like it is their own responsibility to manage their bodies. Consequently, women often “blame themselves – instead of social institutions or public practices – for their anguished relationship with their bodies” (Duncan, 1994: 50). And failure to discipline the body is considered as personal failure (Brown, 2006). For example, it is Kadi’s opinion is that it is a woman’s task to look after herself in order to please her husband and protect herself from comparison with other slim women.

Participant Fadiah describes the change in women’s beauty ideals in terms of the change in men’s preferences which are based on men’s evaluation and appreciation of women’s bodies. She explains how men’s preferences regarding women’s appearance have changed over time from a full to a slim body. Indicating the change in social and cultural preferences in Saudi society, Fadiah narrates:

At present, 70% of men from all ages are interested in slim women, they want slimness... because they find beauty in slimness not in fatness … Men want to see thin and slim ladies. The man, from an early age, say 22, starts looking for a slim lady, as he wants to see the beauty of her body. This can be done only if she is thin because if she is overweight then the beauty of the body will disappear.

It is important to notice that Fadiah describes the change in beauty ideals from men’s point of view. Agreeing with other respondents’ claims of the contemporary beauty ideal, Fadiah points out that men in the past preferred fuller women over thinner women. This was because, based on past ideals, men found fuller women sexy and desirable. Nonetheless, a full body is not ideal any more, having been replaced by ideals of thinness and fitness. Fadiah speaks from men’s point of view to classify what women’s beauty ideals are. She confirms that “Men started to ask their wives to have bodies similar to those of celebrities; thus women challenge themselves to look like celebrities so as to please their husbands. It became an obsession among women, this thing called thinness”. Women now have a pressure to maintain a slim body not only to be chosen as a wife and have a good marriage, rather they have to remain attractive, beautiful and slim even after marriage.
These narrations confirm that the husband-wife relationship has been influenced by the change in women’s beauty ideals. Comparing the interviews of two generations, mothers and daughters, I noted that there is a difference between the relationship the mothers have with their husbands, and the one the daughters have with their husbands in terms of the men’s demands regarding women’s beauty. Hela (married for 36 years) declares that her husband never mentioned her body or weight, though he mentions her health. She says:

> Because my husband is diabetic, he always keeps telling me, “You have to do some physical activities, you are so lazy and inactive, this is not good for your health, you have to walk and move your body”. He cares about my health and doesn’t want me to go through what he suffered.

According to her, her husband does not mention her body size or weight directly, but he shows concern about her health. Being married for a long time, Hela does not feel pressured by her husband regarding her body. She claims that his main concern is her health; thus, he advises her to do physical exercise to improve her health, not because he is dissatisfied with her body. Similarly, Noran (married for 31 years) confirmed that her husband’s concern was about her health rather than beauty and appearance. Noran narrates:

> Not all men are concerned about their wives’ bodies, especially elderly women who’ve been married for a long time, like me. My body doesn’t affect my relationship with my husband. They [husbands] don’t make negative comments about their wives’ bodies; instead they comment positively. He’d say to me, “Be careful with sweets because you’re diabetic. Watch the salt in your food because of your blood pressure”.

Agreeing with Hela, Noran confirms that her body is not an issue in her marital life because her husband does not give importance to her appearance. Rather, he expresses concern about her health. This indicates that neither husband nor wife are affected by the new women’s beauty ideals. They still hold the old notion of a good wife from the previous generation’s perspective, which disregards body shape or size. Noran believes that husbands of her generation typically hold onto the old notion of the ideal woman, which was the good housewife who came from a good family. From her perspective, when her husband comments on her food or body, he is not criticizing her. Rather, he is concerned about her health, and is therefore expressing the intimacy and longevity of their relationship.
These two examples indicate that being middle-aged and married for a long time might contribute to how differently older men are concerned about their wives. When the older generation mention their wives’ bodies or food, their main concern is about maintaining good health and sustaining a better quality of life. Their concern is focused on the fear of developing illnesses that might affect their wives’ health. This implies that middle-aged couples are less influenced by contemporary beauty ideals, as they still hold the previous generation’s standards of appreciation, meaning they have criteria other than body size. Therefore, older generation wives did not show great concern about their husbands’ pressure on their bodies.

However, for the younger generation, daughters showed a different position to their mothers. Beasan (Hela’s daughter) stresses the significance of her body size and shape in her marital life. She emphasises that her husband comments directly on her weight and figure:

I don’t like my body because of my husband’s comments. He says I became ‘fat’, so I’m not happy with my weight and my body … My husband always mentions my belly and how my clothes don’t fit me any more. He always comments on and criticises my belly, he says, “You should exercise, you should have belly liposuction, and you should have a belly tuck surgery”.

Unlike her mother, Beasan narrates that her husband is heavy-handed on her. He criticises her body even though she has a normal body weight. In her case, Beasan has only natural changes in her body due to having a baby. However, her husband does not accept that change and he wants to see her as slim as she was before she had their child. He expresses his ‘dissatisfaction’ with her body through constant negative comments. This confirms the previous section’s claim that when men search for a ‘thin’ wife, they assume she maintains this body because they see this as the beauty ideal. Therefore, Beasan articulates negative feelings about herself based on her husband’s criticism.

Having a normal body weight yet feeling ‘unhappy’ with her body reveals how Beasan defines her subjectivity in relation to her husband. Her story indicates how the new beauty ideals of women’s bodies have a great impact on her husband and consequently on her. His comments and demands conform to a thin image of women’s bodies as the ideal figure. Similar to Beasan, Nora – Noran’s daughter – showed a situation that is unlike her mother’s. Nora’s concern about her body is based on her husband’s satisfaction. Her first priority in monitoring her body is to satisfy her husband:
I’m watching my body, food and diet for my husband. He is a very picky person and he is one of the most important reasons for me to think about losing weight... He pays a lot of attention to my body, and any extra kilo added, he will start commenting and criticizing my body. He loves the very thin bodies, what we call ‘a ruler’, flat from the front and flat from the back, you know a model’s body. I’ve never had this body. I am a curvy woman and he doesn’t like that. He likes a boyish body, no breasts, no butt, nothing.

Unlike Noran’s narration that her husband never mentions her body, her daughter Nora confirms the significance of her husband’s opinion about her body. In her case, Nora’s justification for controlling her body is fulfilling her husband’s demands for her appearance. Despite the fact that a woman’s body size was not important to the previous generation – her mother and father – Nora’s narration shows the difference between the two generations in this regard. Nora articulates that she diets and controls her body only to satisfy her husband. Moreover, his appreciation of extreme thinness has influenced the way Nora feels about herself. However, she laments that the perfect body image that her husband appreciates is unattainable for her. Likewise, Beasan’s husband’s comments have influenced the way she feels about herself, unlike her mother who did not interpret her husband’s comments negatively. This indicates that the shift in women’s beauty ideals has potentially influenced young men more than older men.

Other participants, for instance Nora and Rawda, indicated that for their husbands, not only does body size matter, but it is also important whether the body is toned and tight. It seems that regardless of the criteria for the desired female body, men exert symbolic power over women regarding their body size and appearance, and thus women feel bad about their bodies. Nora stated that her husband likes stick-thin women’s bodies, yet she described herself as a curvy woman who could never look the way he wants. Consequently, she is not satisfied with her body, despite weighing an acceptable 59 kilograms on her 156-centimetre frame. She is unhappy that she cannot fulfil her husband’s desire for the perfect body. Faten is overweight, and her husband likewise is not satisfied with her body. Faten’s husband’s dissatisfactions with her body could cause her – sometime – eating disorder.

For Beasan, the comments she hears from her husband have changed the way she feels about herself and her body. Beasan is concerned about her husband’s evaluation of her body, which reinforces her lack of confidence. His description of her as being ‘fat’ and his request that she get rid of her belly affects the way she defines her subjectivity. Beasan described all of his words as negative, depressing words. The husband factor
seems to be quite important for Beasan and the way she feels about herself. He puts a substantial amount of pressure on her to achieve a fit body to satisfy him. This is because the husband’s satisfaction is considered to be an important factor in the success of a marriage among the youth. This point is raised by Nora when she explains how her body plays a major role in her marriage’s success. Nora narrates:

The husband is a motivation for the woman to look after herself and maintain a beautiful body just to maintain her husband and family. The reason why I am looking after myself and my body is my husband, that's it. I wish my body looked more fit and shapely for me and for my husband. Even if I am home by myself, I don’t feel comfortable when I wear tight-fitted clothing, and I don’t like the way my body looks. Of course, I would be much more confident if I was slimmer. I would be able to wear tight-fitted gowns and bright colours without being embarrassed for my body … When I see supermodels wearing elegant fashions, I wish I could wear [clothes] like them but I know it will not look [good] on me with my current weight like it looks on them. I don’t find their bodies attractive but my husband does.

Overall, all participants’ statements emphasised the role of men in their lives, especially husbands, in the way women define their subjectivities and thus practices. Despite different men having different preferences regarding women’s bodies, they are all demanding, and powerful in their demands. They constitute a large reason for women’s thinking, feelings and behaviour. I can conclude that men’s demands regarding women’s bodies are a substantial social factor influencing the way they feel about their bodies and how they manage their weight.

My argument here – based on participants’ interviews – is that younger generation men are different to those of the older generation. The media presentations of slender women have contributed to form men’s minds about women’s beauty. This way they take slimmness for granted, as a must beauty ideal. Although the participants’ husbands did not clearly articulate the figure of media women, their negative comments about their wives’ bodies reflect their high appreciation of the slim body ideal. Eventually, men’s behaviour, demands, tastes and requirements regarding women’s bodies have changed. The participants’ narrations confirm that the effect of new beauty ideals in the culture is more obvious in the younger generation than the older. This suggests that the younger generation of married couples are more involved in and have been influenced by the change in women’s body and beauty ideals.

Consequently, the change of beauty ideals has contributed in changing the commonly accepted rules that can be assessed against these rules of husband and wife.
relationships. Young men have increased the pressure on their wives to achieve the ideal body. In that sense, women feel *obliged* to fulfil their husbands’ demand on their bodies. The foundation of a successful marriage is a good husband and wife relationship and the data suggests that it is a woman’s duty to look after her body in order to maintain a good marriage. There is never any responsibility or blame attributed or focused on husbands. In other words, satisfying the husband is crucial to maintaining the marriage. Interestingly, the data revealed that within the family, mother and son have a specific relationship. Mother participants affirm that their sons encourage them to take care of themselves and lose weight to keep slim and fit. This mother and son dynamic relationship will be discussed next.

### 5.3.6 The son-gaze

Among mothers, an interesting sub-theme has emerged as part of generational differences, the gaze of sons on their mothers. Mothers mentioned their sons’ comments on their bodies and asking them to lose weight to be healthy. Mothers narrate that their husbands do not comment on or criticise their bodies for beauty reasons. Rather, they are concerned with their health and well-being. On the other hand, they emphasise that their sons do. This aspect shows another layer coming in from the male gaze. Noran was a good participant example of how sons comment on their mother’s bodies. She says:

> My younger son has a different view. He is more liberal and always tells me to enjoy my life and do whatever I want … He always says, “Mom, your breasts are flabby, you have to have breast-lift operation. Mom, your bum is soft, you have to exercise to tone it … Look after yourself, take care about your hair and body. You are 63, enjoy it. You’ll not live it again. Do some fillers and Botox for your face”. He is the only one who has the braveness to tell that another one from my other children can say to me … He also comments on his sisters’ bodies. He says, “Nora watch out for your body, you've put on weight. Your husband will be angry about that. You have to look after yourself for your husband. Maha (the other daughter), what happened to your body? You've lost your fitness, be careful don’t be like your mom!’ … He is saying things that my husband himself never said to me!

Noran’s son’s (who is in his twenties) comments on her body indicate an aspect of generational difference among families, mothers and sons. As she narrates, her son was the only person who could freely comment on her body, though her husband did not. She described him as ‘liberal’ because he has the courage to ask her to follow the contemporary beauty ideals. Her son’s comments were for her and her daughters as well.
This gives a sensation that younger men, including sons, are heavy-handed on their mothers. Men reflect their great involvement by commenting on their mothers, sisters and wives. Similarly, Rawda’s sons (who are in their twenties) are used to seeing their mother fit and slim. Once she puts on some weight, they notice that and comment on it. She narrates:

I feel my husband wants me fit, but honestly he never mentioned this to me. But my sons, whenever I put on weight they notice and comment: “Mom, please be careful, your body used to be fit”. Well, they don’t bother me really, rather it raises the flag that I have to go back to my work out … when I start to lose weight, my sons compliment me on that, then I feel happy.

Fadiah gives us another example of sons commenting on their mothers’ bodies. As she is in her sixties, she considers herself as having a normal body: “I barely can find anyone from my generation that has a fit body. I am not perfectly fit, but comparing myself to other women at my age, I feel I have a good body”. However, when she gains some weight, her son mentions this to her:

My son had warned me about my belly and my sides when they became bigger. My son doesn’t annoy me but I get upset about my body as I did not maintain my healthy weight. Then I start to watch what I am eating more strictly.

Rawda, in her diary, mentioned that she feels good about herself when her noticeable weight loss made her son compliment her. Moreover, Noran noted that her son continually encourages her to look after her body and herself, though her husband did not require her to do so. Similarly, Kadi construes that her sons comment on her body when she puts on weight. She says, “Sometimes my sons say, ‘Mom, you have put on extra weight you have never been like that before. You had a good body before, what happened to you?’” Most of the participants assert their sons comment on their bodies which seems common.

These narrations emphasise that a slim women’s body as a contemporary beauty ideal is a common appreciation among young men. Sons’ gaze on their mothers’ bodies has influenced their actions in the way they articulate their opinions on their mothers. Sons become freer to show their opinions about their mothers’ bodies based on contemporary beauty ideals. Here, I highlight this issue as a new insight into mother-son relationships that has not been highlighted in the literature. Comparing this aspect with Western literature, I could not find any studies investigating sons’ gazes on mothers’
bodies in a reflection of beauty ideas. Unlike what has been widely studied, men’s and women’s gaze in relation to women’s aesthetic, this aspect of mother and son has not been discussed in this context.

To summarise, the data showed that the husband and wife relationship between members of the older generation is less moulded or framed by the change in women’s body ideals and male gaze than that of the younger generation. For the older generation, a woman’s body is not a critical point in their marital life, as they still espouse the old notions of a good wife, which disregard the woman’s appearance. This is to say, it is less common amongst the middle-aged generation, who have been married for a long time, to articulate concern about a woman’s body size. Their criteria for a ‘good’ wife are different to the younger generation, where such comments are more common.

Thus, younger men freely express their concern about their wife’s body weight and shape. They also showed that their demands for women’s appearance are a crucial matter in their lives. Younger men would freely express their dissatisfaction with their wife’s body through negative comments and criticism. The younger generation’s gaze is not limited to their wives, rather their mother as well. Sons verbally articulate their discontent with their mothers’ bodies. This indicates that men have absorbed the new beauty ideals that are constantly presented in the media and set these as a template for a woman’s beautiful figure. Hence, it affects the way in which women form their subjectivities and, thus, their practices (Beale et al., 2016). Men’s requests for women to be fit and slim to conform to the ideal beauty figure put pressure on women to achieve that body. In short, participants’ narrations embed aspects of the cultural change in their social lives. In the light of that, the family as a social unit has a significant role in forming social and cultural change. The next chapter will be dealing with family habitus and the mutual relationship between mothers and their daughters. This analysis uncovers nuances between families’ habitus and gives a rationale to women’s body control practices.

5.4 Surveillance and judgement

As discussed in chapter 2, Foucault (1977a) suggests that surveillance is a form of power that is practised upon individuals’ bodies on daily basis. Surveillance is a pervasive practice among women in everyday interactions and relationships that functions as a tool of power application. It is linked with judgement, as it serves to justify why individuals, in a certain society, would act and behave in a particular manner.
Adopting Foucault’s perspective of surveillance, I describe the important norms of Saudi society that form women’s behaviour regarding their bodies. In addition, I will analyse how surveillance can contribute in how women form their subjectivities.

Saudi society is a conservative and religious society that has a unique culture. Gender segregation is one of the most influential of these norms on an individual’s daily life and thus behaviour. This means that women more typically encounter the gaze of other women, and only that of men who are close relatives. I have already noted many stories and experiences related to the notion of surveillance and judgement among the participants which will be discussed in the following sections.

In fact, the social body has become a “status symbol” that classifies women within the social hierarchy (Seid, 1989: 259). Relatedly, it is useful here to highlight the dynamic of judgement, and identify when it comes to who is authorised to judge whom. Power is unequally distributed among social members depending on various considerations based on different social locations. For instance, being a husband gives a man more power to articulate his dissatisfaction with his wife’s body. Moreover, slimmer women have more power to monitor and judge bigger women. This distinction in the authority of judging illuminates the criteria that give an individual the right to judge other people. In addition, it indicates who is superior and who lacks these criteria, leading them to be located as inferiors in the social hierarchy. This creates feelings of inferiority and of deserving to be judged.

Vaz and Bruno (2003) clarify the issue of judging and being judged based on the distinction in social hierarchies. They assert that individuals who judge others should be at the same level of the social hierarchy or superior to those who are being judged. For example, slim or normal women are able to judge fat women, but not the other way around. This is because slim women are empowered by society for achieving the beauty ideal, thus are located higher in the social hierarchy. This example shows how power relations operate among individuals and within their interactions. Based on this rationale of social judgement according to body size criteria, self-surveillance is being applied by women to monitor their behaviour and manage their bodies and appearance (Vaz and

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3 See chapter 1, the context of Saudi Arabia.
Bruno, 2003). In the following section, I will interpret these narrations in detail and analyse how women articulate surveillance in their society.

5.4.1 “Women dress for women”: Surveillance between women

Riley et al. (2016) study the gaze between women, proving the role of women’s gaze in shaping female subjectivity. In their study, Riley et al. (2016) confirmed that the gaze between women has a significant role in how women define their subjectivities. This indicates the vitality of surveillance between women as a vital factor which has an impact on the way women see themselves.

Applying the surveillance concept, Foucault’s theory of power suggests that surveillance is a form of power that is practiced on individuals (Foucault, 1977a). Similarly, Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power allows us to discover the meaning hidden in women’s practices as it suggests that women are controlled by “indirect, cultural mechanisms rather than by direct, coercive social control” (Jenkins, 1992: 104). Unpacking the surveillance concept between women for my data will demonstrate how they define their subjectivities and practices in that cultural aspect. In connection with the rational of symbolic power, I will investigate the power practised in everyday life.

As discussed previously, women’s body ideal has shifted from a fuller to a slimmer body. By virtue of this change, slimness has become a ‘symbol’ of truth that has to be followed. In other words, slimness is embedded in symbolic power which is “a power of constructing reality” (Bourdieu, 1991: 164). In my project’s case, slimness is the truth that is formed by symbolic power. In that sense, more power is given to slimmer women, who are legitimised to judge overweight women who are located in a subordinate social position.

Investigating surveillance among women is particularly important for this research in Saudi Arabia’s cultural context, where women’s main social interactions are with other women due to cultural norms that necessitate gender segregation. It enables me, as a researcher, to answer the research questions and reveal the sociocultural factors that contribute to forming and reconstructing women’s subjectivities and thus their behaviour. This is not to deny or underestimate the impact of the male gaze on women’s subjectivity, but rather to bring the importance of the female gaze to the surface and discuss it in detail. This element of female surveillance, judgement and symbolic power were evident in all of the participants’ narrations. Surveillance leads to self-monitoring.
In Spitzack’s words, “power in the form of surveillance makes a demand on the individual to monitor the actions of the self” (1990: 44).

Gečienė (2002) interprets Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power as “a subordinate power” based on Bourdieu’s notion that power can be “possessed … accumulated or lost” (Gečienė, 2002: 117-118). This gives a logic to how surveillance as a form of power can work as a symbolic power over individuals. The female gathering is a primary arena for female socialization, and attending these gatherings is a compulsory social commitment that all women are expected to adhere to. These gatherings are the only places where women can present themselves and show off their bodies, fashion and jewellery (Le Renard et al., 2008). Investigating the data, participant Fayza expresses the dynamic of surveillance among women community. She believes that other women look down on her due to her ‘weird’ body shape:

I have a problem with my body; I have two different sizes. My top body part is a small size and the lower part is large. If I wear tight-fitted clothes in occasions, I feel everyone is *looking* at my body … because my hips and thighs are much bigger than my chest, people look at me as having a *weird* body … When I reached 63 Kg I was slim though there were some flabby parts and I hid them with body shapers. However, if I were fit and slim I would definitely wear tight-fitted clothes without being worried what other women would say about my body.

Attending female occasions means Fayza feels that she is placed under active and direct surveillance, with its embedded power. This surveillance triggers feelings of embarrassment regarding her body because she ‘knows’ that women will look at her body and judge her negatively. This judgement moulds the way she feels about herself and, accordingly, the way she dresses. Fayza ‘feels’ women gaze at her body. Her lack of confidence about her body, as she does not meet social ideals, increases her feeling of their gaze. She configures the way that women will see and judge her body based on her social norms. In a Foucauldian sense, her feeling of other women’s gaze indicates the existence of power. From a Bourdieusian perspective, women’s gaze embeds symbolic power, which is a “subordinate power’ where systems of symbolisms and meaning (i.e. culture) [are imposed] upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate” (Jenkins, 1992: 104).

In other words, Fayza’s feelings about her body are formed by the symbolic power that is imposed by women’s surveillance. Fayza describes the consequences of being in ‘unequal’ power relations – symbolic power – that is based on one main criterion: body
size. In that sense, symbolic power is evident because Fayza has taken for granted that slimness is the social ‘truth’ which should be achieved, and not meeting that truth locates women in a subordinate social position. She attributes the negative judgement to the abnormality of her body and dissimilar sizes for her body parts. This is because she internalises social rules and ideals and takes them as an absolute fact. Although Fayza did not claim verbally articulated comments from other women, she feels what they would say and judge her solely by their surveillance. This makes her express her subjectivity as inferior to other women. The feeling of oppression caused by the sense of unequal power relations between Fayza and her society is evident in her narration. Fayza realises social rules and ideals and accepts the power practised on her unconsciously.

To show the difference of being under other women’s surveillance, Fayza describes the opposite position where she is in the private sphere:

At home, I don’t really pay attention to what I wear, everything is fine. Leggings, shirt, pyjamas, night dress, anything. I don’t have to worry about how my body looks. Even if my flabby parts show, it is OK. But when I go out, I don’t dare to wear short tops or tight-fitted clothing, I feel embarrassed. Outside home I like to wear blouses which are tight up top and loose at the bottom, because I have a thin chest and I like to show that and I want to hide my hips. Also, I don’t like to wear sleeveless tops because it shows my flabby arms, which embarrasses me.

Distinguishing the feeling between private and public sphere gives us a sense of the function of surveillance and symbolic power. At home, Fayza does not feel the same surveillance as she encounters in the women’s community. Consequently, she is less worried about her body and less concerned to be judged. Unlike at female gatherings, where the surveillance is felt more, at home Fayza wears comfortable clothing that shows her body’s curves without being anxious about hiding her body from the view of others. Under surveillance, she feels embarrassed and uncomfortable with her body. Fayza is always concerned about her appearance and body when she is outside of her home. This confirms that surveillance and its embedded power exists among women’s communities and their gatherings.

Another participant, Hanan, has similar feelings about women’s surveillance due to her body. Based on her experience, Hanan reflects the active surveillance and judgement among women’s communities. She illuminates the operations and interactions within the female community. She indicates that female gatherings are the milieu where women are placed ‘under the microscope’. In her narration, Hanan refers to herself and
other women as ‘we’; that is, they are those who comprise the ‘community’ in which surveillance and judgement take place. Hanan feels it is active, visible and a noticeable sort of gaze, observing that “other women will stare at [an overweight woman] once she steps into the place”. Hanan tries to generalise this example as applying to all large women rather than only to herself, as she did not report it as her own experience. Indeed, overweight women share the feeling of being a ‘target’ of constant surveillance and judgement (Tischner and Malson, 2008).

Hanan illustrates the mechanism by which symbolic power directed at women’s bodies can manipulate the way that women feel about themselves. Although Hanan is an ‘obese’ young lady, she objectifies herself by speaking in the third person and judging fat women because “our society encourages women to see themselves as objects” (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 31). Hanan states:

> We live in a society where people are judged by their body size and appearance. When you describe any woman, the first feature you would spontaneously say is, “Oh, that thin lady” or “Oh, that fat lady”. We are really concerned about physical appearance ... If the woman is fat, her appearance will be horrible and disgusting, when she goes to a female gathering, and other women will stare at her once she steps into the place, which makes her really embarrassed. She’d feel awkward, odd and depressed, as she’s the only one with that ugly body. Everyone else will stay together in a group except her.

Hanan generalises the issue of surveillance and judgement as being obvious and pervasive in society. Hence, being in either situation – observer or observed – is inevitable. In that sense, surveillance and judgement are entailed to create ‘unequal’ power relations among women (Tischner and Malson, 2008). Hanan’s narration shows the meaning embedded in social practices and clarifies that fat women are aware of this nonverbal judgement – surveillance.

Hanan articulates that this society is a highly ‘judgemental’ society as it gives a great consideration for women’s physical appearance. From her perspective, judging others and/or being judged based on body size is something pervasive and taken for granted. By virtue of Bourdieu’s symbolic power, power is given and legitimate to certain group, classes or individuals over others. Hanan’s expression embodies that larger women consent to be ‘judged’ by other women who have been given the power by society. We can see the unequal power relations embodied in symbolic power. As Bourdieu suggests power is given to those who conform to social norms to be practised on those who do not.
Without recognition of any party – slim or fat women – symbolic power is practised by taking social rules and meanings for granted and judging others based on that. Surveillance and judging based on appearance embodies symbolic power towards women, as epitomised by Hanan’s statement that the “first feature you would spontaneously say, ‘Oh, that thin lady’ or ‘Oh, that fat lady’”. Going back to Hanan’s comment that “When she goes to a female gathering, other women will stare at her once she steps into the place, which makes her really embarrassed. She’d feel awkward, odd and depressed”, reminds me of Spitzack’s (1990) statement that public gaze could affect the way women feel about themselves and thus define their subjectivity. Hanan indicates that Saudi women feel a similar way as Western women about their bodies. In other words, the similar criteria of surveillance, judgement and beauty ideals are found in both the Western and the Saudi contexts, and have resulted in women feeling in a similar way and having a similar understanding of their own bodies.

In this sense, describing women by their body size and ignoring other features is a practice of power upon women “who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that themselves exercise it” (Bourdieu, 1991: 164). Hanan acts as an active viewer and portrays what other women usually do within female gatherings. For Hanan, fat women always look horrible and disgusting, which indicates the way she feels about herself. These feelings about her body have developed from the sense of power that is embedded in other women’s surveillance and judgement. Hanan says that fat women are being judged ‘negatively’ by other women. Participant Hela also expresses her feeling about being observed by other women:

I am uncomfortable with myself because of myself and people around me … I don’t like to wear tight-fitted clothes so I won’t embarrass myself. I don’t like anyone looking at me in an inferior way, I don’t like that. I know myself and my body so I don’t need to embarrass myself by wearing something doesn’t suit my body. So I prefer to wear loose and long dresses … I like to buy clothes that don’t show my body curves or fat.

Feeling other women’s surveillance, symbolic power is practised here by making her feel uncomfortable with herself. Taking slimness as the absolute truth has altered the way women define themselves. Hela is aware of her body’s ‘disconformity’ to social beauty ideals, which leads into making her feel ‘inferior’ to other women who are ‘superior’ and, therefore, are legitimised to judge her. This emphasises Bourdieu’s
expression of unequal power relations as “legitimate in the eyes of beholders” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: xxii).

Participants’ narrations reveal their consent to the legitimate power that is embedded in surveillance. It is evident in the data that surveillance is a form of symbolic power exercised between individuals through their interactions and also legitimised. Noran is another participant who also expressed her feeling about being watched by other women: “I just wear what suits and cover my body so I don’t feel embarrassed while sitting or moving around the place. This is to avoid anyone looking at me in an unpleasant way”. This quote indicates Noran’s sensation of women’s surveillance which embeds symbolic power.

Participants describe the strong presence of surveillance, judgement and symbolic power. Power relations legitimise classification and judgement amongst individuals based on given social norms, in this case, body size. In addition, legitimated power that subordinates people is presented as ‘caring’ for the one who is being judged, but, nonetheless, it affects the judged individuals’ subject formation (Vaz and Bruno, 2003). This social truth is imposed upon all society members as ‘invisible’ to them. However, the existence of this symbolic power entails locating women in different parts of the social hierarchy. Based on participants’ narrations, it was noticeable that larger women feel the surveillance although there is no verbal communication about their bodies and appearance: they can feel the power practised on them. Being concerned about how other women will think about and judge them has altered the way women feel about themselves and how they define their subjectivities. In the words of Morgan and Björkert, “symbolic power is embedded in ‘normal’ routines of everyday lives and shapes social experiences and subjectivities” (2006: 441). That explains women’s expression about surveillance and symbolic power as taken-for-granted facts. Indeed, the exercise of power by individuals usually aims to ensure that others adhere to social norms (Vaz and Bruno, 2003), in which power is embedded (Pylypa, 1998).

This brings the importance of having a slim body to the surface of the culture, illuminating how society rejects bigger women and blames them for being overweight. This has been confirmed by Tischner and Malson (2008: 261), who claim that “being ‘large’ in contemporary society where individuals are assigned full responsibility for their own health, … in turn is premised on the notion that thinness is desirable and achievable for everybody”. By virtue of that, women monitor, evaluate and judge each other in accordance with the primary social criteria of beauty, namely appearance and body size.
Hence, it is not ‘acceptable’ for big women to be big without trying to change in order to meet social expectations.

Tischner and Malson point out that individuals who are aware of being watched by society are “construed and construe themselves as oppressed, marginalized and not fitted normative rules” (2008: 262). This way, they confirm and legitimise the practice of symbolic power upon them, which allocates women to different levels in social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1991); specifically, that slimmer is superior and fatter is inferior. In other words, women who are being judged feel oppressed because they are located in an inferior social position and, therefore, are subjected to judgement, as their bodies do not “conform to cultural standards for appearance” (Spitzack, 1990: 49).

In this respect, the way that Fayza and Hanan feel about themselves is an outcome of power relations where these “instil in the individuals a historically determined relation with themselves” (Madigan, 2006: 147). For Fayza and Hanan, the feeling of surveillance and its symbolic power have contributed to changing the way they feel about themselves and thus their subjectivity. Surveillance, according to Fayza and Hanan, is the actual physical action of looking and its accompanying judgement. This can be considered active surveillance, as women notice and realise they are being watched. Their narrations indicate that, in this society, fat women usually have the sense of the active surveillance; that other women are staring at and judging them. This reinforces the feelings of embarrassment, subordination and inferiority amongst women who are under surveillance and do not conform to social expectations.

Further evidence of surveillance, judgement and symbolic power was found in Neda’s comments. She narrates how she personally judges other women about their appearance:

If I go to a social occasion and a beautiful lady looks gorgeous with a slim body, I will be impressed by her and I’d say to myself, “Look at her flat belly and perfect breasts”. In contrast, if the lady was overweight, I’d say, “What is this? No one would ever think to marry her” … If an overweight lady wears a short dress, tight-fitted or sleeveless clothing, women will look at her and say, “How confident are you?” Let’s say, if you saw a woman with a beautiful fit body, do you think I will not be attracted? I will look at her body and say, “I wish I had her body”. No one would ever wish to be overweight, nor [to have] a flat body without breasts and curves.

Neda portrays a scenario of the situation in female social gatherings. As an active viewer, Neda describes the surveillance and judgement between women in two
contrasting cases. First is the pleasant and desirable case where women are admired, complimented and appreciated for their appearance. The appreciation that a slim woman gets from others is based on her appearance and effort to keep her body fit and in shape. This is because commanding and managing body weight is not an easy task; thus, not every woman is able to do it, especially within Saudi society due to the cultural and social issues which have previously been discussed. Neda then presents herself as being a member of this society who practises symbolic power against fat women. Unlike Hela and Hanan, who narrated surveillance from the position of fat women, Neda described the surveillance and judgement of fat women from the opposing view. Neda’s judgement about obesity confirms Hela’s and Hanan’s claim of being oppressed by social judgement.

Neda points out other women’s ‘confidence’ and attributes it to their bodies. She claims that a fit woman is much more confident than a fat woman because she has a reason to be confident, which is her slim body. This indicates that society authorizes who should and should not be confident with their bodies depending on their body size. Indeed, society legitimises the practice of women with fit bodies wearing whatever they want without being constrained. It is acceptable for fit women to reveal some parts of their bodies without being embarrassed or ashamed. However, fat women are more constrained and should be more careful in choosing their clothing. Consequently, they have less clothing choices than slim women. This is an illustration of the mechanism of the practice of surveillance and symbolic power in regulating women’s behaviour and forming their subjectivities.

Woman dresses to inspire jealousy in other women, and such jealousy is in fact a clear sign of success … Through the envious or admiring approval obtained, she seeks to gain as absolute affirmation of her beauty, her elegance, her taste - herself; she shows herself to bring herself into being (De Beauvoir, 1968: 514).

This is because, socially, it is not acceptable for bigger women to show off their bodies, as it is considered ugly. This is based on social and cultural standards of beauty. Here, Neda presents the ‘judgemental look’ by which she decides, according to the cultural values she has internalised, who would get social appreciation and who will be criticised on account of their body size and appearance. She described in detail what a beautiful body should look like. The lady that Neda described as having a beautiful body can be presumed to have pride in the knowledge that other women are admiring her body
and appearance. This is because obtaining social admiration and acceptance is one of the important points that women seek.

5.4.2 Body shame

Surveillance and judgement enhance women’s feeling of being imperfect according to social standards. The body shame that numerous participants mention in their narrations is defined as “the degree of internalizing Western cultural standards of how the female body ‘should’ look” (Fiissel and Lafreniere, 2006: 328). Similar to Spitzack’s (1990) claim, my participants showed their fear of social surveillance and judgement about their bodies as it reinforces their feeling of inferiority. The feeling of body shame is triggered by the “doubt about the social acceptability of one’s own personal narrative” (Askegaard et al., 2002: 799). This feeling rises with the increase of the difference between current and ideal self (Askegaard et al., 2002). For Hanan, the judging of overweight women not only makes her ‘depressed’ but is also a factor that ‘excludes’ her from socializing with other women. Among participants who are overweight, feeling ashamed, unsuitable and inferior to others due to their bodies emphasises the notions of surveillance and power relations. Conversely, slimmer women are empowered because they conform to social norms and ideals. Hence, they are authorised by society to have more power to monitor and judge overweight women.

Faten’s narration is compatible with other participants’ accounts about surveillance within society. She reflects on the situation for overweight women who feel the monitoring and surveillance by others.

Overweight women always try to avoid interacting with others, to be in any embarrassing situation or to be on the spot. At any gathering, they hide their tummies with sofa cushions. They’re always embarrassed. Even if they want to eat something at these gatherings, they wouldn’t because they are shy about other women's eyes. They will think about what people would say about them, and people would say, “Look at this fat woman, how much she eats!!” And as you know, Saudi people are very sarcastic and they make jokes and make fun of others easily. So, the overweight woman doesn’t want to give a bad impression about herself to others and she doesn’t want anyone to criticise her. In short, she abstains from eating in front of other women. Then you can see how these overweight women are very sensitive to food and body.

Since fat women feel the surveillance, it affirms their feeling of being ashamed of their bodies. Consequently, they adjust their eating behaviour in the presence of other women in order to avoid their judgement. In other words, women’s body weight can play
a role determining their location within the social hierarchy. At female gatherings, Faten claims that fat women are always trying to reduce their contact and interaction with others in order to avoid the active surveillance and thus avoid judgement. Fadiah also affirms fat women’s shame about their bodies, she says:

Society strongly dislikes overweight women because they judge her as a ‘careless woman’. Because when the lady becomes fat nothing fits her and she looks ugly, you feel she is a person with a destroyed life. That makes her feel embarrassed and ashamed of her body.

It is clear that society practises power over larger women. ‘Disliking’ and prejudging overweight women plays a major role in the way that women feel about themselves. Avoiding surveillance for overweight women means they are attempting to reduce the unequal power relations which form the negative feelings about themselves. In this context, participants narrate that surveillance of fat women contributes to reinforcing bigger women’s feelings of embarrassment, shyness and shame about themselves.

Social surveillance and judgement affect the way women feel about themselves. In addition, the feeling of surveillance leads them to monitor their eating manners on social occasions. The evidence that women adjust their behaviour within society according to other women’s surveillance and their body size is obvious in Faten’s remark: “She abstains from eating in front of other women”. This part of that data resonates with Tischner’s and Malson’s (2008) confirmation that ‘large’ women tend to find ways to hide their behaviour, for example sitting in the back of the restaurant to avoid being seen while eating. This indicates that surveillance is influencing their eating behaviour and manners.

Due to the negative judgements that larger women encounter, Faten links women’s confidence and their body size. She gave a clear example of women’s attempts to physically hide their bodies from the gaze of other women, not only with clothes, but also with pieces of furniture: “They hide their tummies with sofa cushions”. Women physically attempt to hide their bodies behind cushions to block other women from looking at them as they feel ashamed and inferior due to their big bodies. Blocking other women’s direct sight or surveillance makes them feel more secure and comfortable. When women do not fulfil social requirements or cultural expectations about their bodies, they tend to feel ashamed about their bodies (Tiggemann and Kuring, 2004). In that sense,
having a big body which is against the social body ideal can be seen as a “source of shame” (Chapman, 1997: 212)

In addition, larger women, who are categorised by society as different, have changed their behaviour based on their location in the social hierarchy. Their location makes them less acceptable and less appreciated. They behave in a way that puts distance between themselves and others. Hela is another participant who expressed her feeling of embarrassment and shame about her body due to other women’s surveillance:

In our society, an overweight lady will immediately be called ‘the fat lady’ or that ‘chubby lady’, as if it was her identity or her name … I don’t like anyone to look at me in an inferior way, I don’t like that, it makes me feel bad and less of a woman … It embarrasses me … Any woman that suffers from obesity will definitely be constrained … Because if she does anything, whether intentionally or not intentionally, people will laugh and make fun of her; mockery, ridicule, irony and so on.

Hela’s interactions with others within society construct her feeling of inferiority regarding her body. Negative judgement by society about her big body makes Hela feel the symbolic power that exacerbates her feeling of subordination. Characterizing herself as ‘ugly’ while walking implies her feeling of shame about her body. Internalizing slimness as a take-it-for-granted social ‘truth’ and not fulfilling this ideal renders Hela to be ashamed of her body. Hela evaluates herself from the others’ perspective. In other words, she ‘surveils’ herself and judges her body from an external point of view. Similar to other participants, Hela did not encounter a situation in which someone mentioned her body either directly or indirectly. Indeed, her view of herself resonates with Fredrickson and Robert’s claim that women:

Internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves. This perspective on self can lead to habitual body monitoring, which, in turn, can increase women’s opportunities for shame and anxiety (1997: 173).

Being under surveillance in addition to the feeling of being ashamed by her body, Hela has habitual body monitoring, and, therefore, tends to judge herself all the time. Notably, all of Hela’s narrations are based on her feeling of surveillance and its embedded symbolic power and unequal power relations. In this way, Hela feels the need to monitor her body’s appearance and is anxious about it. Consequently, she is careful about her clothing choices, as she aims to block her body from surveillance in order to minimise her feelings of being judged and criticised. That confirms Foucault’s claim that
individuals within societies live under constant surveillance, leading them to monitor themselves all the time. Thus individuals apply self-surveillance aiming to be socially accepted by achieving the social and cultural requirements. Hela’s feeling about herself resonates with Lisa in Hesse-Biber’s study, who stated that:

I think the real problem is my whole self-image – the way I see myself – never being able to control myself. I feel so weak … I am just so powerless. I feel awful about myself, pretty much hate myself if I don’t look a certain way … I feel like shit. I avoid mirrors (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 70).

Revealing a cultural aspect about women’s bodies, Hela explains how her society legitimises symbolic power among women based on body size. Society practises power on fat women by constant criticizing and judging them only for being bigger than others. For Hela, obesity is a situation that causes ‘suffering’. Her use of the word ‘suffering’ indicates her constant struggle with this issue on daily basis. Likewise, Fadiah sees being overweight as a condition of suffering and, therefore, she is trying to avoid it, “I love myself, I don’t want to suffer from obesity … I look after my body for my health, husband and for the social gaze”. Suffering because of the body is not limited to weight issues only. Other participants expressed their suffering with their bodies’ shape. Once again, even slim women feel the surveillance that make them less happy and confident about themselves: they ‘suffer’ too.

Neda’s describes her suffering with her body under women’s surveillance:

My weight is not too bad, umm you can say normal, but I suffer due to my belly, it looks horrible. It is really embarrassing. It’s bigger than my other body parts which makes it very obvious, especially when I gain some weight, all the weight gathers in my belly. This is why when I gain some weight I don’t like to go anywhere because the outfit will look ugly on me and people will start asking, “What happened to you? Are you pregnant? Why is your belly big?” You know, so I don’t go.

Suffering is occurring among slim or fat women from different perspectives. While big women feel shame about their bodies on the whole, slim women suffer from specific parts of their bodies that make them feel less confident. This is because they sense other women’s surveillance which emphasises their feeling of inferiority. Direct comments on Neda’s body put her off from going to female family gatherings. This is confirmed by her mother, Rawda, who says that Neda recently is avoiding going to occasions because she does not want to see people and listen to their comments about her body that emphasise her body shame.
For Neda, the change in her weight has affected the way she feels about herself. It is not only because of the change in her body size, but particularly because of the negative comments she receives from other women. She believes that when her body changes and becomes bigger, whatever she wears will ‘look ugly’ on her. She believes that other women will see her body as ‘ugly’ because she was not like that in the past. The comments and questions the women ask about her weight and body indicate a negative judgement about her body and stresses her feeling of shame. In other words, society does not ‘approve’ of such a body change, which contradicts the ideal body. The change in Neda’s body has changed the volume of power she has. In other words, putting on weight has contributed to ‘disempower’ Neda and thus shifts her position in social hierarchy from being able to judge others to being subjected to power and being judged by others. In a Bourdieusian sense, symbolic power is given to individuals who are higher in the social hierarchy. Having a slim body puts women in a higher position, and vice versa. Neda continues:

My aim is to flatten my stomach and shrink my belly button. After having three babies it became very loose and looks ugly. It can be seen also when I wear tight-fitting t-shirts, you can see how ugly it is. Sometimes, when I watch Bollywood movies, I feel jealous of their flat bellies and small belly buttons. I really would like to have a tummy tuck operation and belly button shrinking. But sometimes I feel scared of the operation. Now I am thinking of laser and ultrasonic treatments as a solution to flatten my belly. This is because I feel constrained by people and that I cannot wear a tight-fitted dress when I go to a social event, it will elucidate the shape of my body. I feel embarrassed, yes embarrassed by other women in that occasion.

Neda’s narration indicates her rejection to move to a lower social position, and because of that, she avoids socialization. She cannot adapt to the new position of being under surveillance and being judged. Avoiding female gatherings, Neda attempts to decrease social surveillance and judgement, and thereby lessen the impact of the symbolic power of their ‘annoying’ comments about her body. Women judge and criticise her for putting on weight, which affects the way she feels about herself; now she is less comfortable and less confident about her body. She feels such probing is inappropriately intruding into her life. Neda’s case suggests another element of social surveillance and judgement: that society not only judges overweight women who do not conform to beauty ideals, but also women who have moved a step away from their body ideal. Neda’s mother, Rawda, is in a similar situation. She is slim and her managing of her body is an active issue in her life.
Many people say I have a good body but I have to do some abs exercise … Once I gain weight, I get upset, uncomfortable and desperate … I hate socializing and seeing other people because I cannot wear my clothes which I used to wear when I was slim, they don’t fit me anymore … I don’t like to wear tight-fitted clothing when I have lumps … Others will say, “You’ve put on weight” and I know that, I don’t like to hear negative comments about my body.

Gaining weight or changing her body shape makes Rawda feel out of control. She moves the position from superior to inferior in the social hierarchy, in accordance to symbolic power notion. Putting on weight, Rawda starts to lose her power to manipulate her body and therefore her position within the social space. She feels inferior and depressed when her body is out of control and she gains weight. When Rawda has the body she likes and has the ability to wear her favourite clothes, she feels empowered and in control over her body because she can make choices linked to her body. However, when she puts on some weight, Rawda cannot wear what she likes, which means that she has less options to choose from. It seems that Rawda’s confidence is strongly connected to her feelings about her body and social judgement. Furthermore, her intensive concern about other women’s surveillance and judgement of her body is apparent.

It seems that Rawda feels that she lives in constant surveillance from other women and that plays a significant role in determining her feelings about her body and her relationship with herself. She articulates her dislike of hearing negative comments about her body, though she highly appreciates it when someone compliments her on her body. Many times during the interview, Rawda mentioned ‘people’ and their comments about her body. This is because she is concerned about her conformity to social ideals and thus with obtaining social appreciation. Rawda continues:

I don’t like to wear stretch because it shows my body’s imperfections … I prefer loose shirts with high waist jeans to shape my belly because I don’t like the way my belly looks … Once, I received a dress gift from my sister, a stretch dress. I was preparing to go to our weekly family gathering, so I put it on and I looked at the mirror!! It was horrible. I was very upset about what I saw in the mirror and I changed it. I wore it at home later … If I like a dress and I feel I can’t wear it in female gatherings because my body will look ugly in it, no problem, I will buy it and wear it here, at home for my husband.

Rawda tries to hide some parts of her body from women’s surveillance by wearing loose clothing. She evaluates her own body and appearance based on her reflection in the mirror. This way, she believes, she can see what other people will see when they look at
her because “the concept of a mirror gives us an analogy for how society fosters women’s obsession with their weight and body image” (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 31).

Rawda adds another dimension on her feeling about her body, the distinction between private and public. In her following experience, Rawda shows how body shame and embarrassment differs at home “at home I wear cotton t-shirts with leggings to show my body curves, and it is comfortable for housework.” For Rawda, it seems that the parts of her body that are acceptable to reveal within the domestic sphere are not allowed to be shown in public. In other words, wearing leggings and a t-shirt reveals that her body’s curves are accepted within this limited surveillance. This is because her family members’ surveillance and judgement are expected to be different from non-relatives, as they give her excuses for not being perfect, for example, due to health issues. Nevertheless, within the public sphere, people are always judging each other regarding appearance, body and body size, ignoring other conditions. Due to her awareness of the distinction between public and private judgement, Rawda makes a distinction between her clothing choices at home and in public. At home, Rawda is not very concerned about hiding her body from surveillance as she does in female gatherings.

Both Neda and her mother Rawda used to be socially empowered by having a slim body throughout their lives. However, they both showed body shame and embarrassment whenever a change occurs to their bodies. They both showed their desire and preference to be socially empowered by having fit bodies rather than being socially oppressed when they gain weight. They both show lack of interest to go to female gatherings as they can feel the surveillance by other women and thus being in an inferior social position. Similarly, Beasan expresses her feeling about her body:

Yes my weight is ideal, 51 Kg, but I don’t like the way my body looks because of my belly and fat distribution in my body ... My dream is to wear my wedding dress again ... I don’t like my belly after having my daughter, it won’t go away. It doesn’t matter which diet I follow, belly fat is stubborn and it won’t go away. I’m suffering for this issue. It’s in the back of my head all the time. When I visit my in-laws, I can feel something in their eyes as if they are blaming me for the belly because they are very picky on their sons’ wives.

Unequal power relations, symbolic power, are related with women’s emotional suffering and body shame that determines how women feel about their bodies. In other words, women’s surveillance is a significant factor that contributes to how women define their subjectivities (Riley et al., 2016). This has been highlighted in participants’
narrations: larger women avoid being seen because surveillance increases their feeling of inferiority. This illuminates overweight women’s subjection to unequal power relations, which makes them feel inferior to others, thus, symbolic power raises the feeling of ‘body shame’.

Surveillance and emphasis on body shaming has a role in women’s social isolation or exclusion. As participants stated, fat women are being excluded in female gatherings. Hanan says, “Everyone else will stay together in a group except her”. What Hanan means by that is that fat women do not have the courage to go and sit and socialise with other women in their gatherings. And they do not literally reject her. Rather, she feels the shame about her body because she knows that they will look at her as inferior. Another sort of exclusion that has been evident in the data is the avoidance of going to family gatherings. Neda refuses to be under surveillance and feel the symbolic power being practised over her. Because of this, she does not go to female gatherings when she gains weight.

The women in this study developed depression as well as embarrassment and shame about themselves because society is judging their body sizes when they do not meet the social standards of beauty. Furthermore, surveillance and judgement categorise women’s appearance as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ compared to others and to social ideals (Foucault, 1977a). Subsequently, social surveillance and judgement play a role in developing women’s negative feelings about themselves. Based on their experiences, Hanan’s and Fayza’s feelings of inferiority and depression are directly linked to their body size, which is being evaluated and judged by the society. This judgement and comparative gaze by other women is more ‘damaging’ to their subjectivities than men’s gaze because it is more explicit and ‘pervasive’ (Riley et al., 2016:108).

In other words, overweight women are being judged for their weight, and slimmer women are also judged if their bodies have changed. Neda’s sense of surveillance led her to decline invitations to women’s gatherings and social occasions, similar to Faten’s opinion that overweight women avoid situations of being ‘on the spot’ and under surveillance. This resonates with Tischner’s and Malson’s (2008) emphasis on the importance that women give to their visibility within society, especially when they are practicing body related behaviour. Their participant Scrumpz says “if you do go out to eat, it sort of, well me personally I sit there and I’m looking around, ‘who’s looking at me, who’s looking at me’ / I:Hmmm / uhm, I sort of avoid eating in front of people”
(Tischner and Malson, 2008: 262 emphasis in original). Therefore, social surveillance is an important element that moulds women’s bodies’ shame or pride.

In that sense, Duncan (1994: 50) bears out that “women learn to compare their appearance with that of the patriarchal feminine ideal thus become objects for their own gaze”. Comparison can be used as a measure for women’s bodies, either among the local society or other ones around the globe (Hesse-Biber, 1996). Here, I refer to the Western ideal body image because the essence of this research is that the Western body ideal has become a phenomenon among contemporary Saudi women, leading them to appreciate thinness (Tawfiq and Ogle, 2013). This comparison between the ideal and the real affects women negatively in the way they feel about themselves. When this comparison does not correspond with the ideal body image, women feel ‘shame’ about their bodies (Choma et al., 2009).

5.4.3 Body pride
Unlike fat women’s feeling of embarrassment and shame, slimmer women feel proud and empowered, as they own an important body aesthetic that bigger women do not have. Askegaard et al. define body proudness as “the individual feels socially accepted and valued” (2002: 799). Being overweight is linked with a negative body image whereas slimness is linked with positive self-consciousness (Spitzack, 1990). The previous discussion bears out the mechanisms of surveillance, power relations and symbolic power in constructing overweight women’s feelings and relationship with themselves. This section will look at surveillance and symbolic power for slim women. Faten sees that the most prominent advantage a slim woman gains from society is ‘admiration’. She narrates:

For a slim woman … when attending social occasions with friends or family, she will be much more confident, as she feels ‘distinctive’- unique in an attractive way- that [there is] no one else there like her. She can talk freely and with self-confidence. She can wear whatever she likes and it will look beautiful on her. Unlike the overweight lady, who wouldn’t have the same degree of self-confidence and will feel inferior to others.

Faten reiterates Neda’s point about the importance of obtaining other women’s admiration and acceptance at social occasions, which are the most common milieu for women to interact and socialise. Faten took the position of the appreciated woman, rather than evaluating from a judgemental point of view. Despite not being slim herself, as she
is overweight, she describes what she misses and lacks. She mentions distinction, confidence, and being free as traits enjoyed by slim women. She also described the opposite state of mind, which is not pleasant and which no one would desire.

Women can accumulate symbolic power, as Bourdieu argues, “in proportion to the recognition they receive from a group” (Bourdieu, 1991: 164). In that sense, slim women who achieve social beauty ideals are ‘empowered’. Gaining social respect, appreciation, and compliments, give the slim woman the pride of achieving the social ‘truth’. For Rawda, women’s comments and compliments about her body are an important matter. She likes to hear positive comments and compliments on her appearance, which give her the sense of controlling her own body and thus feeling empowered. She narrates her experience with weight loss and changing her body size, which was followed by compliments from other women:

I’ve lost seven Kg … It was noticeable, I’m very happy about it … I’d be even happier if I lost more weight. Last week, I went to our female gathering and a friend of mine, who is intuitive, saw me and immediately said, “You’re slimmer!!” I felt very proud … I love to hear when someone compliments me on my body, I just love that … When I lose weight, I like to show it and wear tight-fitted clothing.

Narrating her experience with weight loss, Rawda mentioned that other women’s opinions are important for her. The feeling of pride in losing weight or depression due to gaining weight are core issues for Rawda. Indeed, Rawda articulated that women’s direct surveillance and judgement is an important matter that shapes the way she feels about herself, either positively or negatively. This part of Rawda’s narration reveals an aspect of the “mechanism of social power” (Brown, 2006: 105). Social power has a direct association to women’s subjectivity by determining the way they feel about themselves. Rawda’s narration also indicates the degree to which she is constrained by her body. Actually, controlling her diet, losing weight, and receiving positive comments about her body makes her feel happy. In that sense, we can see how power relations are an active factor that generates positive feelings in Rawda’s case.

In contrast to the practice amongst bigger women of hiding the body, Rawda prefers to show off her body: “I like to show it”. It is a sort of distinction from other women who, at her age, cannot achieve what she managed to do. In other words, Rawda likes to show off her source of symbolic power. Having the socially ideal body translates into being worthy of showing it and gaining social appreciation. This is an opposite situation for Rawda when she loses her slimness and, therefore, she loses her
empowerment. In a Foucauldian sense, Rawda feels empowered by women’s surveillance and judgement when she is in control of her body. This is because she describes their direct judgement as the source of her pride. Having and controlling a beautiful body, Rawda feels empowered and that she is in command of herself. For Rawda, her body is her life project that she controls.

In Fayza’s case, there is a huge transformation in her appearance and even her self-confidence. She used diet to discipline and transform her body, and went from being obese to obtaining a normal, healthy weight. She suffered from being obese for a long period of her life, but she decided to discipline her body by dieting. She says:

My first attempt to lose weight was in 2010. I went to a dietitian in a diet clinic to evaluate my condition and to design a diet plan. I followed up with this dietitian for three or four months and I lost only six Kg. Then I stopped that diet and started my own diet without a plan alongside appetite suppression pills … During that year I managed to lose about 35 Kg; my weight dropped from 110 Kg to 63. At that point, all of my friends and family stopped making fun of me and started to support me. They said, “Keep on going, you are doing very well”. I felt very proud of myself, I felt like a real person … There was a huge difference in my feelings during these two situations. After reaching my goal, I felt extremely happy and over the moon because my old jeans were so big and wouldn’t fit me any more; I threw them in the bin [laughing] because I don’t want to see them any more. I tried them once and found them huge for my current size then I got rid of them.

Fayza started her weight loss journey by joining a diet centre and meeting with a nutritionist for guidance in order to help her follow a healthy diet and lose weight. After that, Fayza knew the main keys for a healthy diet; she learnt how to change her lifestyle, which proved more effective for her. As she could not manage to achieve her aim by following the dietitian’s advice, having lost only a few kilos over four months, which was not enough for her, Fayza changed her lifestyle and managed to lose all of the weight she wanted to lose. Similar to Nora’s narration, Fayza did not like to feel constrained by a certain diet plan. Therefore, she preferred to change her lifestyle, which mainly consisted of reducing food portions and changing food quality as a technique to manage her body.

Even though there are several techniques that can be applied to manage the body weight, Fayza preferred diet to be the tool to discipline her body. Indeed, diet is “one of a number of patriarchal disciplinary practices played out on the body through forms of assujetissement – the process of at once becoming a subject and becoming subjected” (Heyes, 2006: 127 emphasis in original). For Fayza, disciplining her body by dieting in order to obey social rules was an important achievement in her life. She experienced
many types of diets, Atkins Diet, Cambridge Diet, fasting, and following a dietitian’s guidance.

Despite dieting being a technique for managing body weight, applying it over the body with the aim of losing weight can function as a self-construction (Heyes, 2006). This is clear in Fayza’s narration when she expresses how losing weight helped her to gain self-confidence and reconstruct herself: “I felt like a real person … There was a huge difference in my feelings during these two situations”. Having contrasting feelings about herself that are related to the change in her body size has contributed to changing the way she feels about herself.

This resonates with the case of Thebandinme, in Young’s and Burrows’s (2013) study, when she describes her feelings of post-weight loss surgery as “feeling more confident in a lot of ways, my ego is swelling a little bit” (p. 498). Also, Divataunia says, “but tonight I just feel a new sense of confidence about myself and I walked around with my head held high” (Young and Burrows, 2013: 498). These narrations reveal how the change in women’s bodies alters the way they feel about themselves. Like Thebandinme and Divataunia, Fayza perceives herself in a new way losing weight. All three have had improved self-confidence, body image and self-appreciation. All of them have set themselves a goal to achieve, although they applied different techniques.

Fayza set herself a goal to lose weight in order to increase her confidence and to be more socially accepted (Beruchashvili et al., 2014) by manipulating and disciplining her body. When she decided to lose weight, she dealt with her body as a project to accomplish and to reach the goal she aimed for (Shilling, 2012). Elsewhere in the interview, Fayza mentioned that the main motive for her to lose weight was ‘herself’, and she did not lose weight for any other reason. As long as symbolic power is an embedded form of power, Fayza is unconscious of the power impact on her decision to lose weight.

This was evident in prioritising others’ opinions, judgements and comments about her body before describing her own feelings about herself. Others complimenting her body and weight loss achievement influenced the way she feels about herself. She suffered from their negative comments about her body, which made her feel bad about herself. However, when she lost weight and changed her body size, they started to encourage her and compliment her appearance. In both cases, society practiced power on Fayza which is embedded in their judgement and comments. Social surveillance and judgement have a great contribution in forming Fayza’s definition about her subjectivity.
For Fayza, symbolic power operates when she internalises social rules and ideology and is self-subjugating, not realising or appreciating the subjugation she experiences; indeed, she may even narrate it as empowerment or gaining control. Fayza links the way she feels about herself with social judgements about her. She feels ‘proud’ about herself for managing to lose weight and attain social appreciation.

The difference between the two situations, obese and fit, has drastically changed the way she feels about herself: “I felt like a real person”. That illuminates how Fayza’s body obeys social norms that require her to be fit and slim. By controlling her food intake, Fayza managed to change social judgements about her body and eventually changed the way she feels about herself. Her experience reflects the enormous role of social surveillance and judgement in forming her subjectivity and the way she feels about herself.

5.4.4 Self-surveillance, the mechanism of social power

The previous section demonstrates that surveillance is a form of power that is exercised upon individuals’ bodies. In relation to that, “any practice of surveillance entails self-surveillance” (Vaz and Bruno, 2003: 273). Self-surveillance is an indication of consenting to and legitimising power relations or in Bourdieu’s view, symbolic power. Defining self-surveillance, Vaz and Bruno state:

The attention one pays to one’s behavior when facing the actuality or virtuality of an immediate or mediated observation by others whose opinion he or she deems as relevant – usually, observers of the same or superior social position… individuals’ attention to their actions and thoughts when constituting themselves as subjects of their conduct (2003: 273).

According to the participants’ narrations, women socializing within female gatherings actively practise surveillance. As a researcher applying the participant observation method by attending female gatherings, I noticed this surveillance embedded in their gaze and comments. As discussed previously, such surveillance carries with it judgement by other women based on body size and appearance. The women sense that they are being observed, and therefore they try to deal with the situation and with others’ gaze. Indeed, women engage in constant self-surveillance “to ensure that they comply with cultural body standards and therefore avoid negative judgements” (Tiggemann and Kuring, 2004: 302).
Hela is an example of how women become aware of surveillance and accept surveillance’s embedded rules and norms. Hence, she presents her awareness of and feelings about being under social surveillance:

I am uncomfortable with myself because of myself and people around me. I don’t like to wear tight-fitted clothes so I won’t embarrass myself. I don’t like anyone looking at me in an inferior way. I don’t like that. I know myself and my body so I don’t need to embarrass myself by wearing something that doesn’t suit my body. So I prefer to wear loose and long dresses. I like to buy clothes that don’t show my body’s fat or flab. Also, I don’t like transparent clothes. Sometimes, I see clothes on a mannequin or model and I like it. But when I take my size it looks ugly on me.

Hela expresses her feeling about her body within the female community. The main point in her narration was the significance of others. She is concerned about others’ judgement and her feelings are based on that. This expression indicates her acceptance that others are legitimised to observe and judge her. She articulates her discomfort about her body weight and appearance and she attributes that to herself and to other women around her. We can see how society locates women in different social levels based on the privilege of body size. Consequently, she applies self-surveillance and monitors the way she dresses in order to ‘avoid’ social surveillance and their judgement or comments about her body. This way, Hela shows her embodied cultural capital where she understands the rules of the game – which is the social surveillance – and thus chooses certain type of clothes and feels in a certain way about her body.

The statement, “I don’t like to wear tight-fitted clothes so I won’t embarrass myself” indicates that Hela is monitoring herself and decides not to wear clothing that reveals her body’s curves: she hides them. By doing so, Hela means to adjust the way she feels about herself and conceals the source of shame and inferiority, by wearing loose clothing. Decreasing the visibility of the source of ‘shame’ makes Hela feel safer and more comfortable with her body. Once again, the triad of surveillance, self-surveillance and internalising others’ gaze has reinforced her feeling of inferiority and resulted in an “increase in both shame and anxiety about the body and appearance” (Tiggemann and Kuring, 2004: 300). Another participant, Beasan, illustrates an example of self-surveillance that is underpinned by social surveillance. She narrates:

Sometimes my weight drops to 50 Kg but I’m still fluctuating between 55 and 50 but never 45 as before pregnancy … I don’t like my current body because of the comments I hear that I became fat thus I am not
happy with my weight and my body … Everyone’s body represents what they eat. What you eat in private you wear in public … I am trying to reduce food intake but my lifestyle doesn’t help. I want to eat healthier to dress better.

Internalising the “‘power’s eye’ that is based on cultural standards of bodily beauty” (Vaz and Bruno, 2003: 276), Beasan monitors herself and her body. In other words, by internalising power’s eye, Beasan conforms to symbolic power that is embedded in values. Consequently, any change in her body weight will move her away from beauty ideals and, therefore, from her comfort zone. In this way, Beasan ‘problematises’ her thoughts about her body based on cultural norms that are given as truth and she struggles to fit within that truth.

We form an image of ourselves according to our feeling of being watched (Brown, 2006). Because Beasan is being monitored by society, the change in her body weight contributes in changing the way she feels about herself. The power that society practises on Beasan in the form of comments renders her to be unhappy with her body. Reacting to surveillance by applying self-surveillance confirms symbolic power that is practised on women by society. In her mind, she knows that her eating habits and food intake will form her bodily representation among society, hence she monitors herself.

As discussed in previous sections, women who apply self-surveillance are suffering from body shame and appearance anxiety (Fiissel and Lafreniere, 2006). This feeling of embarrassment and shame of the body “generates an intense desire to hide, escape the painful gaze of others, or disappear, along with feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness” (Fredrickson et al., 1998: 271). Women monitor themselves by being aware of the ‘defects’ of their body and its incompatibility with social norms. Thus, they attempt to deal with these situations by monitoring themselves in order to avoid other women’s gaze and judgement.

Noran is another participant who exhibited self-surveillance practices and monitoring of her appearance as a reaction to social surveillance. She says:

When I attend any occasion, I feel OK about my body. However, if I am hesitant or uncomfortable, that would probably be because of my clothes or dress, not because of my body … Sometimes I’d say to myself, “This dress would show my belly”. Then I might feel embarrassed … No way would I wear tight-fitted clothing. I just wear what suits my body which I feel will cover my body so I don’t feel embarrassed while sitting or moving around the place. This is to avoid anyone looking at me in an unpleasant way … when I buy clothes I take my daughters’ opinions; however, we always disagree about what I wear. I like to buy long, loose dresses, and my daughters don’t like that. They want me to buy more
fashionable clothing which I don’t like … When I see a mannequin in the shop window I feel I’d like to have a body like hers but obviously it is impossible.

Again, similar to Hela, Noran monitors herself and evaluates her own appearance based on social beauty standards. Clothes in Noran’s case, as with Hela, function as a tool to manage her body and hide parts of it. Socialising and its accompanying self-presentation is an important arena where Noran practises self-surveillance. Noran gives high attention and awareness to her appearance in the presence of social surveillance. In saying, “When I attend any occasion”, Noran shows her concern about other women’s surveillance and judgement. Consequently, she monitors herself, evaluates her appearance and takes pre-emptive steps to avoid the judgement of other women about her body and appearance. In this way, she avoids the negative feeling of embarrassment “while sitting or moving around the place”.

Participants monitor and assess their own bodies by looking at them through others’ eyes (Muehlenkamp and Saris–Baglama, 2002). Self-surveillance determines their choices of clothing and presentation of their body. This lack of self-confidence stems from body weight (Chernin, 1994). Noran’s narration reflects her mixed feelings about her body, although she claims it is not her body that worries her but rather her clothing. However, she indicated her body anxiety and worry by referring to her clothing but not to her body. She attempts to hide her body by wearing “long, loose dresses”, despite her daughters’ disapproval. Proceeding with the interview, Noran contradicts herself in her narration. She unintentionally shows her passion and desire to be as slim as a ‘mannequin’. Overall, she wanted to show her satisfaction with her body as a general feeling about herself. However, she revealed a counter feeling, although she did not articulate it, through expressing her passion to have the ideal body.

Hanan is another participant who narrated self-surveillance in her behaviour: “I’ve put on 15 to 20 Kg in three years … I feel ashamed … I am dissatisfied with my body … I’m unhappy with my current weight. I am very very very upset about it”. In Hanan’s comments, we can see the explanation of the change in her body, and she articulated her awareness of it. She explained that she gradually put on weight and that this process has made her feel ashamed. Hanan constantly monitors and assesses her body and appearance to attain social appreciation and acceptance.

Hanan monitors and judges her body size according to social norms by internalising the ‘power’s eye’. As Vaz and Bruno put it: “self-surveillance is also based
on the cultural postulation that certain thoughts and actions are dangerous or unwholesome to the constitution of the individual as a subject” (2003: 273). By saying, “I wear clothes that hide my sides and belly”, Hanan admits that there is a part of her body that does not conform to social requirements, thereby she is “normalizing judgement” about her body (Vaz and Bruno, 2003). In other words, Hanan’s sense of social surveillance constrains her choices of clothing and also controls the way she feels about herself because she does not conform to social beauty ideals. Similar to Noran and Hela, Hanan monitors herself and applies self-care practices for dealing with her appearance. She shows great concern for hiding the source of shame: her body.

Society expects and requires women to be fit and slim, and if they are not, then they are located in lower social positions by the rule of symbolic power. Hanan accepts the legitimised symbolic power that other women have by monitoring her own appearance in accordance to social norms and ideals. Therefore, self-surveillance is a consequence of practised social surveillance.

Because she applies self-surveillance, Hanan feels constrained by her body. She claims that she cannot wear the clothing she likes, as to do so would be counter to social norms. Hanan knows social norms of body ideals, thus she monitors her appearance within this society. Hanan asserts that fashion styles and clothing designs are her passion as she has a good ‘fashion taste’ for choosing her clothing. However, her passion contradicts social rules due to her body size. She is constrained – by her body – from practising her passion of buying and wearing trendy fashions.

I like to mix and match my cloths, I’m really concerned about this issue because this is my passion. With my body, I’m constrained and uncomfortable because I can’t wear whatever I want. When I see thin women wearing very nice clothing, I get jealous because I can’t wear them because of my body. I say to myself, “If only I had her body, I would wear even nicer clothes than hers” … When I go for shopping, I see many different clothes that I can mix and match with each other and they are beautiful but unfortunately I can’t buy them because of my body. If I buy them they will look ugly on me.

Hanan states the option of buying the clothes she likes is available. However, because she is aware of social surveillance and judgement, she applies self-surveillance in order to deal with social surveillance. Hanan could buy clothes she likes and follow her passion, but as she internalises the social gaze, she says that these clothes will look ‘ugly’ based on social norms. Hanan’s experience demonstrates how social surveillance constructs self-surveillance and hence alters behaviour.
Likewise, Layal monitors the way she presents her body among the women’s community. She says:

I feel my body is OK, I don’t see myself as overweight, I mean I’m comfortable with my body … Whatever I do is for myself, I don’t care about what others say … I don’t like to wear tight-fitted clothing that shows the unpleasant areas of my body, which are my belly and my sides. Well, I don’t like it when women look at me and I don’t look perfect with this belly and sides, what they will say! … Thus when I go shopping, I try to find something that hides unpleasant areas.

Layal does not classify herself as overweight, though she applies self-surveillance in favour of social norms. In her case, it is not body weight she is concerned about, but body shape. Despite that she never mentioned in her interview that anyone has commented on her body before, she applies self-surveillance as complying with social surveillance. Layal ‘objectifies’ herself and internalises the power’s eye. In that sense, she monitors her appearance based on social ideals which are the ‘truth’.

Her narration shows a contradiction regarding her concern. She refers to her feeling of not being comfortable with her body to herself and denies the role of others. However, she immediately mentioned, “I don’t like it when women look at me and I don’t look perfect with this belly and sides, what they will say!” She has the sense of power embedded in surveillance and the accompanying judgement. Similarly, Rawda monitors herself in accordance to the social gaze:

I don’t like to wear tight-fitted clothes when I have excess fat. This is not for others but for me, I don’t feel comfortable when I put on weight. People will say you put on extra weight and I know that, so I don’t like to hear negative comments about my body.

Putting on weight and increasing her body size is a source of insecurity. Rawda articulates two elements influencing her in terms of how she feels about her body: herself and others. However, she only refers to herself as a controller of her own body. Interpreting these elements, social surveillance and self-monitoring are evident in her narration. Admiration, compliments and appreciation from others are essential to Rawda’s subjectivity. Receiving compliments and denying criticism reveals Rawda’s subjectivity of presenting herself in society.

As part of applying self-surveillance, individuals look at themselves “through the eyes of others” (Brown, 2006: 107). Women act and behave based on their body size and shape. The way women feel about themselves is shaped by their bodies. Therefore,
women regulate their own behaviour and actions depending on their body size, whether they are slim or fat. In other words, surveillance directs women to shift to another level of surveillance, which is self-surveillance. Feeling the surveillance and considering others’ judgement builds women’s self-awareness and thus alters and adjusts their behaviour accordingly.

Overall, analysing participants’ stories and experiences allowed me to see how systematic surveillance works as a tool of power that forms the way women feel about their bodies and themselves. Women are subjected to the power embedded in surveillance and then they turn the gaze onto themselves and they start to monitor themselves. Self-surveillance entails noticing the difference between their current bodies and social body demands. It is evident in the data that women live in constant social surveillance, especially by the gaze of other women in Saudi society. This feeling of being watched has an influence on women’s subjectivity, leading them to “turn their gaze onto themselves and self-monitor and self-discipline according to the prevailing order” (Tischner and Malson, 2008: 264).

Applying self-surveillance requires individuals to engage with self-care practices (Vaz and Bruno, 2003). Self-care practices such as dieting and exercise are considered by Foucault as disciplinary practices. Women apply these practices over their bodies which function as power that is “exercised by individuals on themselves” (Chapman, 1997: 212). As Foucault (1977a) suggests, there are many forms of disciplinary power that can be practised upon individuals’ bodies. The next part will focus on the disciplinary practices that Saudi women use to control their bodies. Moreover, I will analyse how women apply these disciplinary practices as technologies of the self in order to control the way they feel about themselves. Dieting, exercise and clothing were the main technologies that women refer to in order to control their bodies.

5.5 Disciplinary practices, dieting and exercise

Exploring the data in the previous sections, surveillance and self-surveillance are prominent key themes. Vaz and Bruno (2003) construe that the application of self-care practices stems from self-surveillance. This section explores how self-surveillance is being translated to care of the self practices which function as disciplinary practices. I will describe the disciplinary practices that Saudi women apply in their daily lives to regulate their bodies in order to conform to social norms and expectations.
According to Foucault (1977a), self-care practices, which are disciplinary practices, are a further application of power over bodies that manipulate them to make them docile. Docility is a form of body ‘objectification’ that requires the body to obey the power (Foucault, 1977a) and normalise judgement that is practised by society. Dieting and exercise, as they conform to the social management of disciplining the self, prove the existence and application of social power over individuals (Brown, 2006). Dieting and exercise are widely used as “disciplinary practices [which] represent the body as a machine” (Sawicki, 1991: 67).

In a Foucauldian sense, self-care practices are applications of disciplinary power that individuals practise in order to regulate their bodies. Foucault defines discipline which “makes individuals” as “a specific technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (1977a: 170). In other words, disciplinary practices are the actions or behaviour individuals apply in order to regulate themselves. Other scholars also discuss disciplinary practices as maintenance or servicing the social body. For example, Brown (2006) argues that in contemporary societies, women’s bodies have become their own commodity thus they need maintenance. Likewise, Featherstone (1991) discussed the commodification of the social body. He argued that the social body has become a machine that needs “servicing, regular care and attention to preserve maximum efficiency” (Featherstone, 1991: 182).

Such arguments indicate that the woman’s social body is malleable and docile, as it can comply with disciplinary practices. Hence, they employ available disciplinary practices which can help them to change the ‘controllable’ appearance: the body. Available weight management practices give women the opportunity to manage their bodies which are malleable. This is unlike the past when beauty ideals were based on natural beauty that women were born with and lived with without being able to control it such as skin tone and face features. In other words, the ideal body is assumed to now be achievable for every woman, and therefore there is no excuse for them to not control their bodies. Women become responsible for monitoring and disciplining their bodies in order to maintain them in good condition, in conformity with social rules and norms.

To understand how different practices can be used to control and discipline the body, it is necessary to remember an important issue about the social body. Foucault argues that the social body is not a static entity but rather it is docile and malleable. Therefore, if our social body was static and not manageable, we would not be able to manipulate and control our bodies using different practices. Foucault defines the docile
body as “the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds … a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (1977a: 136). Women’s docile bodies go through power relations within our daily lives in response to prevailing social demands.

Nora is a participant whose body and the management of her body are important issues in her life. She is concerned about the results of dieting, and to have a slimmer body. Her main aim is to reduce her body size. She narrates her weight loss experience and how she applies dieting as a disciplinary practice to control her body:

If I want to lose weight I just reduce my food portions … I would like to lose 10 Kg to get down to 50 Kg … Now I am using appetite suppressant pills, and so far I’ve lost four Kg in a month … the first couple of weeks, I didn’t lose any weight, though I wasn’t eating at all. I felt so disappointed. I felt my body is light but nothing is different on the scale. Then I started to lose weight and so far, I’ve lost four Kg. I felt a little difference in my body, though it was not the difference that I can say had changed my size, but I felt good … two weeks before any big occasion, such as a wedding or so, I start fasting to lose as much weight as I can because most gown dresses are tight-fitted. And if I wear one with my current body it will definitely show my body’s imperfections.

The mission of losing weight is an achievable task for Nora that takes some effort to accomplish. “Reducing food portions, appetite suppressing pills and fasting” are practices that Nora applies aiming to lose weight for a short period of time. Nora’s perspective of slimness is limited to the application of certain practices. This shows women’s obsession with food and the strong link between bodies and food (Seid, 1989). It resonates with Hesse-Biber’s claim that women are convinced that “in order to lose weight they need to buy something, whether it is a pill, a food plan, or membership in a self-help group” (1996: 39). Nora disciplines her body using methods that might be unhealthy and unsafe, such as weight loss pills, just to lose weight. The pills she mentioned were unlicensed and from an unknown source, having been bought in the local market without official medical accreditation. Women would apply any practice, no matter how harmful it is in order to achieve the slim body (Chernin, 1994).

Likewise, Beasan joined Cambridge Diet Centre in order to control her weight. She comments:

There is no excuse for anyone to be overweight. These places can help in managing weight. They deliver food daily to everyone’s home; they offer some discounts, which is excellent. I believe there is no excuse for anyone to be overweight … For me, I took the decision to reduce my weight and I joined Cambridge Diet Centre … Currently I am on Cambridge Diet
Beasan’s application of weight loss practices is like ‘maintenance’ for a machine rather than a whole lifestyle. To discipline her body and lose weight, she joined Cambridge Diet Centre to help her succeed in weight loss. Similar to Nora, she joined the diet centre for a particular period of time, aiming for achieving her goal weight. These experiences construe Foucault’s notion of the docile body which can be “manipulated, shaped, trained … subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, 1977a: 136). Their weight control practices represent the docility and malleability of the body. They also demonstrate the mechanism by which surveillance and self-surveillance operates on women in their pursuit of achieving the feminine beauty ideal.

Instead of following a healthy lifestyle to maintain a good body, Beasan and Nora control their bodies as a temporary practice and their aim is to accomplish the mission during a short period of time in order to achieve their goals. The aim of these disciplinary practices is to “shape the body in conformity with feminine ideal” and thus to take up “as little space as possible” (Duncan, 1994: 49). They are trying to lose weight and drop down sizes by applying these practices. Indeed, Nora’s diet, which is basically reducing food portions rather than following a certain plan, is for her an obvious disciplinary practice she applies to control her body, as “food watching goes hand in hand with body watching” (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 77). Nora and Beasan both describe their bodies as a project that can be controlled whenever and however they aim.

Faten’s disciplinary practice is problematic. She wants to lose weight because of the constant comments, the symbolic power, however she is not successful. She comments:

My height is 148 cm and I am desperately trying to lose my weight but it reaches the minimum weight of 55 kg and goes up again … I am not satisfied with my body … I will lose weight one day! When someone comments on my body, I cry and stop eating until I starve. Then I eat insatiably and am back to the same point … I really want to lose weight, I stop eating, then I reach the starvation point then I eat wherever I come across … I tried many diets: Atkins Diet, vegetarian diet or one type of food diet, blood type diet. All these diets I believe are wrong … I feel that I want to reduce my weight … to please myself and to be confident when people look at me, no excess fat, no flab … and for clothing. I desperately want to wear a bikini, I would like to see a beautiful body in the mirror. When I go to a female gathering, I wish to wear low-waist jeans and T-bag underwear. I would like to wear a crop top with a flat and perfect belly. Clothes and gaze, when you go to any occasion and you have a fit and perfect body, people will look at you differently. This is Saudi people,
they prefer a beautiful and thin woman, dressed up and confident. They give her looks of admiration.

Faten’s experience confirms that the relationship between women and food is “a troubled relationship … one of the principal ways the problems of being female come to expression in women’s lives” (Chernin, 1985: XI). Faten’s purpose of losing weight is to have a better appearance among women and gain respect and admiration at occasions and female gatherings. She mentions diet as a ‘tool’ that can discipline the body so as to conform to the feminine beauty ideal within society. In other words, Faten objectifies her body and internalises others’ gaze to evaluate her own appearance. Again, social surveillance is embedded in her narration, alongside self-surveillance, and therefore it was a justification for her weight management practices. Faten’s body is malleable and manageable; it is docile.

Alongside “reducing food portion, appetite suppressing pills and fasting” as a disciplinary practice to control the body that participants mentioned above, Rawda adds a complementary practice to manage her body. Rawda demonstrates her application of exercise as a disciplinary practice to manage her body, which “has become part of a complex obsession” (Seid, 1989: 3). Rawda relies on exercise as a technology for controlling her body.

Since I was a teenager, belly dancing has been my favourite exercise … I used to watch my food and exercise so as to maintain a fit body, which no one did at that time. I loved dancing because I wanted to keep my body fit, curvy and toned. I loved exercising and I am in love with exercising … over 20 years ago, I joined a gym and a diet centre, and I did that for myself, not for my husband, though I feel that he gets excited when I go to the gym. I do it for myself and my society … It was not popular among women at that time who look after the body. But nowadays women are more aware about their bodies and appearance, and started to be more concerned about dieting and exercise.

Applying exercise, which is a less popular body practice among Saudi women (Al-Eisa and Al-Sobayel, 2012), Rawda feels empowered and in control over her body. As she claims, most women at her age cannot exercise as she does, thus she feels proud of herself. For example, Fadiah says, “But I can't exercise because I suffer from roughness of the knees”. Noran said when I asked her if she exercises: “Me?! [Laughter] No, no darling, no way. To be honest, I don’t consider exercising … I feel lazy so I don’t exercise and I don’t have the motivation”. Rawda has loved exercising for a long time, even when
no one paid attention to the issue of body size and weight. That is, she has been using the contemporary disciplinary practices among women for a long time.

This lens of Rawda’s narration reveals something about her habitus. Self-care, self-improvement and body management are part of Rawda’s subjectivity. As she confirms, exercising and looking after the body are not new practices that she applies like other women. Rawda’s self-care is a taken-for-granted practice that is part of her daily life. As discussed before, Rawda internalises a very specific ideal body: ‘slim and toned’. Rawda’s application of disciplinary practices is a manifestation of her habitus since she makes some connections about her aesthetic and body ideal judgements and her bodily practice history. She has developed these practices since she was young for health and beauty maintenance. The trend of going to the gym and caring about fitness was ‘complementary’ to her habitus. As she mentions, belly dancing has been her passion since an early age. Her narration resonates with Frank’s (2001: 68) claim that:

Bodies seek only to mirror images they have already internalized. In their diets and exercises … closed in the endless reproduction of their own images.

Rawda enjoys exercise not only as a disciplinary practice for maintaining good body shape, but also as a hobby. She expresses herself with exercise as part of her subjectivity. However, the apparent contradiction in her justification of managing her body – “for myself not for my husband … I do it for myself and my society” – reveals the double-sided nature of controlling the body. While emphasising her own passion, decision and control, her narration reveals the symbolic power that practised by her husband and the society. Rawda complies with the social and cultural demands of slenderness, and at the same time, she is resisting it. She ascribes the effort and the motivation to exercise to her passion and denies any other external factors.

When she mentioned that she joined the gym for herself and her society, she meant that she was disciplining her body to get social appreciation and acceptance. Brown clarifies this contradiction of body management as being “both compliance and resistance to cultural hegemony” (2006: 106). Therefore, exercising helps Rawda’s body to be in good shape and, therefore, she receives ‘compliments’ from her society, which she is keen to receive. In other words, Rawda manages and disciplines her body to fulfil her own passion of controlling her body as well as to meet social norms and requirements.
I love exercising, not a particular type of exercise ... aerobics, water aerobics, stability ball and exercise bike. For example, I love swimming, if I can’t swim I go for a walk for 40 to 45 minutes, if not, I ride the bike, if not, I just walk in the garden. I can't stay still, I love moving. I always talk with my daughters about this issue as it is always on my mind. Every day, I go to the gym to exercise from 10 am to 1 pm.

Unlike other women, Rawda expresses in detail her passion for exercise. For her, exercise is a lifestyle. She lists the types of exercise she prefers to do when she goes to the gym every day. This detailed description shows her familiarity with sports and how passionate she is about it. Power, which operates from ‘inside’, ensures Rawda’s constant conformity to social demands. Fadiah also follows diet and exercise as disciplinary practices. She claims that the new orientation towards pursuing thinness among women has become for her an ‘obsession’. Women pursue this ideal with the available techniques, such as dieting and exercise. She comments:

Every woman seeks thinness through many ways. They exercise and diet … to dress elegantly and for the social gaze. They are really concerned about what people will say about their bodies and how society will look at them. Women want to show society their fitness and elegance in their outfits … Everyone asks me, “What diet do you follow?” I say, “Nothing, I eat as you except, I eat in balance and I don’t overeat and I avoid fast food. I am really concerned not to eat whatever because I fear to put on weight” … When the lady becomes fat nothing fits her and she looks ugly, and she becomes a person with a destroyed life.

Fadiah reflects the more general thoughts and attitudes of applying bodily disciplinary practices among my participants. Within society she confirms that slimness is becoming an absolute ‘beauty ideal’ that all women are pursuing. Women diet and exercise to discipline their bodies and “to achieve productive ends of [their] own” (Frank, 2001: 58), a slim body. Regarding her own experience, she claims that she does not follow a specific diet, though she is careful with her food intake. This means that she disciplines her body by reducing food portions and avoiding high calorie meals, in other words, she is dieting.

For the women in my study either diet and/or exercise are ‘normalised’ practices to manage their weight. Chapman (1997) affirms that weight management practices – such as dieting and exercise – among women are mechanisms of feminine practices that emphasise women’s subordination in patriarchal society. In that sense, these practices are not undertaken to merely fulfil the disciplinary side; they also function as a technology of the self where they control women’s feelings about their bodies. The following section demonstrates women’s application of technologies of the self.
5.6 Technologies of the self

5.6.1 Diet and exercise

Foucault’s concept of technology of the self is linked with how women feel about themselves and define themselves as subjects. In modern societies, taking care of the self entails applying various practices and behaving in a certain way (Foucault, 1986). Individuals apply technologies of the self in order to support their subjectivity (Chapman, 1997). In that sense, dieting and exercise can be applied to form one’s subjectivity and the way one feels about oneself alongside with managing body weight.

In an analogous way, when Hanan diets, she feels different about herself, though there was not a noticeable difference in her appearance. She says, “Today I feel light and happy. Yes, nothing has changed in my body, but I feel comfortable and happy”. Hanan’s application of diet demonstrates how this disciplinary practice functions as a technology of the self not only to lose weight, but also to control the way she feels about herself. In contrast, not being able to follow the planned diet – that is used as a technology of the self – makes women feel the opposite. Hanan states in her diary:

Unfortunately, today I messed-up with my diet. We had lunch at my grandmother’s home. They cooked rice and chicken and I had to eat because I don’t want anyone to know that I’m dieting. I had dessert, 7-up, I destroyed the diet, I’m so upset and feel bad … I’m so upset, I hate myself, I feel I want to cry. I started to mess-up with my diet, but no one knows. I’m having chocolate without anyone seeing me. It has been four weeks that I haven’t eaten sweets probably. I feel so bad. Even my colleagues at work, they have noticed that I look sad, they asked me what happened. I said nothing. I just feel depressed and sad.

Having a meal which might not make much difference in weight, Hanan felt depressed because of it. Hence, the remarks that food (and therefore diet) is an important principle that contributes to women’s subjectivity and the way they define themselves (Chernin, 1985). Similarly, Rawda’s feeling about herself has moulded her diet. She manages her body quite well through diet and exercise. She applies these not only as a disciplinary practice to manage her weight, but she also diets and exercises because it makes her feel in control of the way she feels about herself. In her diary, she notes:

I messed-up with my diet today, I had 2 loaves of bread. I feel guilty towards my body. I feel bad. Lots of negative thoughts came to my mind. What have I done to my body! I feel uncomfortable with my body.
Rawda expresses her dissatisfaction when she does not follow her diet as planned, and she had negative feelings about herself. For Rawda, her body is her life project, around which everything in her life revolves. She links her diet with her happiness and psychological status. Rawda is sensitive regarding her body, thus failing in weight management practices makes her upset about herself. In other words, watching her diet and extensively exercising are the technologies that she not only applies to manage her body and appearance, but also to control the way she feels about herself. She comments:

After the month of Ramadan and messed-up with diet and putting on some weight, I’m back to the right diet. I feel good. I feel light. I’m satisfied with myself because I’m having the right food … Today I got back on track so my psychological condition was better. I follow diet and exercise strictly so I can please myself and relieve the feeling of guilt. I started eating healthy and I felt happy about myself.

Food for Neda is also a technology where she expresses her satisfaction or dissatisfaction. She says: “When I get upset I tend to eat and eat and I think it is only one life so why not eat? Before, I was not a big fan of sweets and desserts but now once I become upset I start eating chocolate and drinking Pepsi which was taboo for me! Then, I put on weight and I feel bad and guilty about that food”. Neda wanted to show the downside of eating as a remark for her negative feelings. When she is worried or annoyed, she uses food as a way to ‘feel good’. However, this feeling is temporary and it turns into a negative feeling afterwards.

In addition, Neda uses horseback riding as a technology of the self that gives her the sensation of being free and psychologically comfortable. Neda narrates:

Horseback riding is very important in my life. I love stables, I feel free there. I don’t mind going every single day. Thank God I have horseback riding in my life. I'd be mad if equestrianism wasn’t in my life. When I’m on horseback, I feel proud and glorious … I have to be very careful and pay attention to the horse and deal with each horse differently depending on their character, they are different. Even the gap between my legs and the horse has to be very specific. When I do the barriers jump, I have mixed feelings. Anxious, scared and excited. What pulled my attention towards horseback riding as a sport is that it works well on toning the body and relieves stress. Back and neck muscles cannot be strong unless you do horseback riding … Now I am more careful with my diet alongside horseback riding, I really feel much better.

During the interview, Neda kept mentioning horseback riding as a ‘project of her life’. Her favourite sport is seen as a technology of the self because of the intense sensations it produces in her body. Hence, it affects her behaviour and the way she defines
her subjectivity. Neda articulates her sensation of feeling ‘proud and glorious’ as a result of practising this sport.

Controlling her weight, Nora feels good about herself. Monitoring her food intake means she is controlling the source of her mood and feelings.

I feel my body is light but nothing is different on the scale. Then I started to lose weight and so far, I’ve lost 4 Kg. I felt a little difference in my body, though it was not the difference that I can say had changed my size, but I felt good.

For Nora, diet is a disciplinary practice that is applied in a short period of time rather than a lifestyle. Hence, the change in her body is not massive or noticeable; she manages to lose only a few kilos although her aim is 10 Kg. Despite that, diet also functions as a technology of the self. Nora feels lighter and better about her body when she applies these technologies. This emphasises her feeling of commanding and controlling her body. Treating the body as a project does not necessarily mean there will be a huge transformation in its appearance or size, but also it entails individuals “being conscious of, and actively concerned about, the management and appearance of their bodies” (Shilling, 2012: 7). The transformation was not only on the physical level of appearance, as there was a difference in the way she feels about herself.

Notably, not only these two disciplinary practices – dieting and exercise – have been applied as technologies of the self. Data reveals that clothing is a significant factor that women apply to control their appearance and thus their feelings. The following section describes how women use clothing as technology of the self.

5.6.2 Apparel, clothing and fashion

The previous sections discussed disciplinary practices that women apply to manage their bodies, as well as dieting and exercise as technologies of the self, which produce women’s sensations and understanding about themselves and thus explaining their behaviour. The themes of surveillance and self-surveillance have emerged in the previous discussions, too. In this section, clothing and its function to show or hide the body was a prominent factor that women reference as a technology that helps them improve their sensation about their bodies. The idea of the (in)visible body is shown to be present and important among the participants.
The notion of hiding the female body from the male gaze is an old tradition in Saudi Arabia that encompasses moral, religious and cultural aspects (Al-Munajjed, 1997). According to cultural values, clothing modesty and decency, either in public or private spheres, are highly appreciated in the Saudi Arabian context (Tawfiq and Ogle, 2013). A woman’s body details should be unobserved and hidden under her clothes. Covering the body from head to toe, except for the face and hands, is taken for granted as a cultural and religious requirement (Long, 2005). However, the issue of surveillance between women in their community has been overlooked within Saudi society.

In the past, women were not subjected to surveillance and judgement regarding body size as they are today. Based on generational shifts and cultural change the linking of women’s body slimness with the beauty ideal has now become the social norm. Therefore, participants in their narrations paid primary attention to their body presentation. As long as the body needs to be dressed, apparel is an essential tool that is related to body presentation. Solomon and Schopler (1982) argue that clothing is highly connected to individuals’ subjectivities.

Clothing choice can adjust individual appearance and thus how “we are perceived by others” (Solomon and Schopler, 1982: 509). Hence, clothing is a crucial element of the technology of the self and is also considered as “body decoration” (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001: 3). For example; participant Hanan describes her experience of her body’s visibility under women’s surveillance:

I try to wear loose clothes, and at the same time I try not to make them look ugly, I add some accessories to them … I wear clothes that hide my sides and belly and the most important thing is to hide my sides. If I found a top that might be a bit tight on my belly but covers my sides, I would go with it because my biggest problem is my sides … With my body, I am constrained and uncomfortable because I can’t wear whatever I want … When I go for shopping, I see many different clothes that I can mix and match with each other, and they are beautiful, but unfortunately I can’t buy them because of my body. If I buy them they will look ugly on me.

Because she is overweight, Hanan knows how to dress to make herself feel better. Despite considering loose and baggy clothes – that are usually worn by big women – ‘ugly’ and not suiting her taste, she believes that is the appropriate option for her situation. Classifying the appearance of a big body as ugly is based on her “taken-for-granted reality” social norms which moulds her assumption about herself (Brown, 2006: 105). This reminds us of Davis’s participant, who was overweight, when she said that “Nothing
ever looks good on me” (1995: 78 emphasis in the original). Here, it is apparent that fat women share a similar notion of having an unpleasant appearance due to their large bodies. For them, the elegance and good appearance of clothing is connected to a fit body.

This explains the necessity for Hanan to conform to social requirements. Her body’s appearance is her main concern. Hanan’s narration explains a ‘conflict’ and ‘struggle’ that she encounters. Throughout the interview, Hanan emphasised her passion for fashion many times to show how important this issue is to her. She wants to show her elegant taste through her fashion style, but she lacks the ‘instrument’. She claims that she is knowledgeable about fashion designs, fabrics, colours, accessories and all related issues. In other words, Hanan considers herself to be a fashion trendsetter (Entwistle, 2000). This emphasis on clothing and fashion reveals a part of Hanan’s subjectivity. Also, it illustrates how Hanan uses clothing as a technology of the self where she controls the way she feels about herself. This goes well in line with Askegaard et al. (2002) that fashion industry contributes, in a way or another, to women’s subjectivity by controlling their bodies’ sizes.

However, she thinks that being ‘fat’ is the opposite situation to trendy fashion. As she claims, fashion requires a slim body to demonstrate the beauty of the design. Even though she can wear fashionable and trendy clothing, doing that will make her feel less comfortable and confident about herself. This is because – as she claims – trendy fashion is usually tight-fitted that would show the body’s curves and this is what she wants to hide. Thus, loose clothes that make her curves less obvious are the only option Hanan feels that she can choose. Instead of being able to wear whatever she likes, Hanan is forced to choose loose, baggy clothing that hides her body and makes it less visible. The way that Hanan feels in these clothes would seem important to the analysis I am developing of clothing as a technology of the self that can control the way she presents herself in society. Moreover, clothing plays a role in shaping how Hanan feels about her body, thus adjusts her choice of clothing. Choosing baggy clothes forms Hanan’s feminine subjectivity and her feelings and thoughts about herself. They reinforce her discontent with her body, her shame and feeling of disapproval.

Clothing and fashion are part of Hanan’s passion, her daily preoccupation, and, therefore, her subjectivity. She believes that a ‘feminine’ woman should have both a good body and nice taste in clothing. Mainly, what Hanan thinks of a woman’s appearance is a feminine feature of the ‘ideal woman’. This is because for some women, buying clothes symbolises the pleasures of femininity (Davis, 1995). To fulfil this passion, Hanan gives
clothing and fashion as a vital reason for losing weight. This means that body size plays a major role in women’s definition of their subjectivity and controlling their behaviour. Hanan adds:

All of my clothes don’t fit me any more and I don’t want to buy new things because I really don’t like my body and I want to lose weight … It has been a while – say a year – that I haven’t gone shopping … I just wear my old clothes. I thought now my weight is high and I want to reduce it, just save my money to buy new stuff when I lose the weight. Even when I see something I really like, I don’t get excited about it because of my body size. Nothing will fit me … I say to my sister, “If only I become thin, I will buy beautiful clothes”. I will mix and match clothing to be the best [laughs] I have nice clothes that would look gorgeous on me if I were thin … If you wear only fabric without any particular design, it will be perfect on you if you ‘only’ have a slim body. When I see thin women wearing very nice clothing, I feel jealous because I can’t wear that because of my body. I say to myself, “If only I had her body, I would wear even nicer clothes than her”.

Here, Hanan reveals the opposite situation for slim women. Based on beauty ideals, slim women can be more visible as they are empowered by conforming to social beauty ideals. Hanan believes that slim women have the opportunity to represent their elegance, taste and confidence by wearing nice clothing. In that sense, Hanan indicates that slim women are empowered by having nice bodies. Hence, they can wear trendy fashions and different designs without being limited to long and loose ones. Thus, they are also using clothing as a technology of the self where they feel good and proud about their bodies. At the same time, bigger bodies are supposed to remain less visible, and the choice of clothing is the best technology that fat women can use in order to conceal their bodies’ curves and flabby parts.

Because Hanan is enormously passionate about clothing, unlike other participants, she revealed in detail the role of clothing in her life and thus her subjectivity. As she claimed previously, clothes look ugly on large women, and therefore she felt constrained from buying new clothes. Hanan links buying new clothes with losing weight and having a nice body. This is similar to Spitzack’s (1990) claim that women whose intention is to lose weight postpone buying new clothing. For Hanan, buying new clothes is connected with beauty and fitness, and buying new clothes for her ‘fat body’ is just a waste of money because the main ‘tool’ for elegant fashion to function is the ‘fit’ body. Likewise, for Hela, a fit body is essential to being elegant, even though with any particular fashion design “the bigger the dress gets, the uglier it becomes”.

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Participant Neda has a normal body weight, however she is not comfortable with her body shape. She has expressed her concern about the female gaze within social space. She says:

I don’t like to wear tight-fitted clothes because I don’t want to be criticised by anyone. My brothers will say, “Your belly, your belly” and my dad will say, “You have to exercise to get rid of you belly”. Now, I started to change my style to make my belly less visible. Now I buy high-waist jeans and loose t-shirts to hide my belly. I’d like to wear short and sleeveless dresses but I can’t. However, if I lost a few centimetres from my waist I could wear a body shaper and then wear the dress. Before I buy any new dress, I have to first study my body ‘terrain’ [laughs].

Neda’s narration demonstrates how she use clothing as technology of the self. The choice of a certain type of clothing can control the way Neda feels about herself. Wearing high-waist jeans and loose t-shirts is a practice to ‘hide’ unpleasant parts of her body. This means she feels less anxious about her body and boosts her confidence in constructing her feminine subjectivity. This is a parallel of avoiding more revealing clothing that increases her self-consciousness about her appearance. This reminds us of Emily, in Tischner’s and Malson’s (2008) study, who denied herself the opportunity to go swimming because she does not feel good in a bathing suit that is revealing as she did not want to show her body in a bathing suit and preferred to cover it.

Noran is another participant whose narration is embedded within clothing as a technology of the self. She narrates her experience with her body’s invisibility and how she makes apparel choices based on her body size. Similar to Hanan, Noran also hides her body behind loose clothing to escape the social gaze:

No way would I wear tight-fitted clothing in any gathering. I just wear what suits my body [loose clothing] because I feel it covers my body’s curves and flabby parts so I don’t feel embarrassed while sitting or moving around the place. This is to avoid anyone looking at me in an unpleasant way … When I buy clothes I take my daughters’ opinion; however, we always disagree about what I wear. I like to buy long loose dresses and my daughters don’t like that. They want me to buy more fashionable clothing which I don’t like, it doesn’t suit my body and my age … When I see mannequins in the shop window, I feel I’d like to have a body like that but obviously it is impossible!

Noran reveals why and how she uses clothing as a technology of the self. Considering herself ‘fat’, she confirms that tight-fitted clothes do not suit her body and she cannot wear them to these gatherings, based on social norms. Moreover, Noran construes her feeling of being watched and judged that renders her to feel constrained
about her body’s visibility. The preference to wear long and loose clothes describes Noran’s feminine subjectivity. Her choice of clothing that suits her age and her body describes the application of technology of the self through clothing. Feeling her body needs to be ‘covered’ and ‘hidden’ enhances her confidence and feeling good about herself. Despite that Noran’s daughters disagree with her style of clothing, she prefers her choices. Hence, Noran’s clothing serves as a technology of self where it contributes to changing the way in which she feels about her body and herself. In that sense, Noran’s behaviour of wearing covering up apparel reveals “part of the person” (Bourdieu, 2010b: 83) that makes her feel ‘less visible’ and ‘more comfortable’.

While Noran choses long, loose and baggy clothes that hide her curves, her daughters disagree with her choices. Noran points out the difference in taste between her and her daughters, who encourage her to wear trendy fashions, but she believes that new fashion does not suit her body and her age. For Noran, wearing trendy fashions is limited to slim and young women, because nothing looks good on overweight women. This leaves fat women with few and very limited options to choose from that can hide their body’s curves. Fayza’s view about ‘appropriateness’ of women’s clothing to their age is similar:

> When I see a woman in her 50s or 60s wearing bright colours, short dresses or sleeveless tops, I laugh at her because this type of clothes don’t suit her. I am not the only one who will laugh at her, everyone will criticise and laugh at her, simply because the way she dresses doesn’t suit her age.

Fayza, too, is an example of how women adjust the way they dress in accordance to social norms. She narrates:

> Usually, I wear leggings with a long shirt to cover up unpleasant areas of my body, of course I don’t dare to wear short tops or tight-fitted clothing at any gathering … I wear blouses which are tight up top and loose at the bottom because … I want to hide my hips … I don’t like to wear sleeveless tops because it shows my flabby arms, which embarrasses me … If I wear tight-fitted clothes at occasions, I feel that everyone is looking at my body … Because my hips and thighs are much bigger than my chest, people look at my body as a weird body … When I see models’ bodies I say, “Oh God, I would like to be like them”, I like their bodies and I ask myself, “Is there any chance that I have a body like theirs one day?”

As a technology of the self, Fayza choses specific types of clothing for different reasons. She describes her body as having two different sizes, she deals with this problem with clothing. Choosing clothes that emphasise pleasant areas of her body and ‘hide’
other parts of her body makes Fayza feels better about herself. Here, Fayza’s body status brings to mind Davis’s study which found that women would undergo cosmetic surgery as they “can never find one size which fits both top and bottom” (1995: 78, emphasis in the original). While Davis (1995) claims that cosmetic surgery is used to deal with differences in the individual body size, Fayza uses clothing to deal with the differentiation in her body sizes.

This again reminds us of Ali, in Tischner and Malson (2008), who deliberately wears black as a technology of the self – to hide her body. Similarly, Noran feels more secure when she wears clothes that make her body curves less visible. She is trying not to be seen by other women, as her body is a source of embarrassment. Visible and invisible are two contrasting situations for Noran. Because of her body size, she hates to be visible, as that carries judgement. However, being invisible and less obvious to others makes her feel more secure and more comfortable. Wearing baggy clothing, Noran believes, helps her avoid the sense of symbolic power by other women.

Once again, participants’ narrations give an account of female gatherings as a site of symbolic power. Fayza has the feeling that other women will look at her and judge her appearance, which makes her embarrassed and uncomfortable with her body, as big women always feel that they are a target of observation (Tischner and Malson, 2008). This is because not meeting social expectations would make her feel embarrassed and she wonders what other women say about her body and the way she looks. Therefore, she finds that loose and non-revealing clothes suit her body and this makes her more comfortable in terms of how people would look at her and how they would judge her. In other words, social judgement directs Fayza towards choosing clothes that conceal and hide her body from surveillance.

Kadi, who describes herself as overweight, also remarks on clothing as a technology of the self. She claims that Saudi society is a very judgemental society, where appearance and body are the first things women are judged upon. Based on that, the choice of clothing plays a role in how women would feel about themselves within their society:

> When you see a fat woman wearing tight-fitted clothes which show her round body, [it’s] very ugly looking. In fact, this type of clothes are not for her. Even within society, people will criticise this type of clothing which doesn’t respect others’ sight. She should wear loose clothes that hide her body’s flab. I don’t like to wear tight-fitted clothing or sleeveless [shirts]. I feel uncomfortable, and these kinds of clothing don’t suit my
Some women wear unsuitable clothes, for example, a fat lady wears tight-fitted clothes. For me, I won’t do that because I don’t want to make people make fun of me. They will say, “Look at this woman, what she’s wearing, she doesn’t respect her age”. We have this type of society. To avoid anyone judging me, I have a mirror and I look at it to judge myself.

Kadi judges fat women who do not hide their bodies’ curves and do not “respect others’ sight”. This reminds me again of Tischner and Malson (2008), when they affirm that fat women judge other fat women for wearing bathing suits that they shouldn’t because they believe that fat women look *yuck* in bathing suits, and they should only be worn by thin women. Kadi believes that clothing is a technology used by women to control their appearance which play a role in forming their subjectivity and hence the way they feel about themselves.

To summarise, the participants who are overweight expressed concern about their bodies’ visibility. This situation is uncomfortable and makes them feel less confident about themselves. Hiding their bodies under loose and baggy clothing is a technique women apply to decrease their visibility, as “visibility is a trap” (Foucault, 1977a: 200). As long as large women are ‘trapped’ in their bodies, they have to deal with that situation. Therefore, for them, clothing and fashion function as a technology of the self where they can control the way they feel about themselves. Feeling comfortable, embarrassed or ashamed are all feelings developed by their clothing. All participants expressed that clothing is used to decrease their bodies’ visibility by hiding their body’s flab and fat. This is because “a ‘large’ body [is] constructed as better hidden/not to be seen” (Tischner and Malson, 2008: 256). At the same time, they indicate that slim women use clothing as a way to reveal their power by having slim bodies and thus feel proud and confident. Hence, apparel is a technology of the self that women apply to control the way they feel about themselves.

### 5.7 Summary

This chapter dealt in detail with the data collected during fieldwork. It aimed to reveal the socio-cultural factors that lead women to adopt weight management practices, and to uncover women’s experiences and motivations related to controlling and managing their bodies. Social and cultural change from one generation to the next were apparent in the data. The preference for slim bodies can be identified as an aspect of the rapid cultural change of the last decade. According to my study participants, the ideal of a slim body
was not present thirty years ago. Middle-aged women, the mothers who participated in this study, described the beauty ideals when they were young which were concentrated not on the body, and where the body was mentioned it was a fuller body as the ideal. The mother participants in this study describe how they witnessed a significant change in the culture based on the obvious shift in beauty ideals between past and present, as revealed in their narrations.

Affecting both men and women within the society, this chapter shows how these beauty ideals also have had an impact on younger men and women in families. The younger generation are saturated with the figures of slim women in the media, which as the chapter has shown lead women to recount how men now – from their perspective – demand that their wives achieve slim bodies. The chapter confirms through the narratives of the mother participants that was not the case for the older generation, and how sons are now judging their mothers with contemporary slim body beauty ideals. In this chapter the experiences and stories of the women participants showed that members of the older generation have different interests in their wives that are based on health concerns, whereas the youth showed greater concern about women’s bodies and appearances. In short, this chapter described how new women’s beauty ideals that appreciate slimness have a stronger effect on the marital relationship among the younger generation than the older one.

In this chapter Foucault’s (1977a) notions of power, surveillance and self-surveillance have been used to effectively explore how power relations within Saudi society shape women’s subjectivities and thus their behaviour. The chapter has shown how power is practised on individuals through surveillance and judgement. This ensures the domination of the society over women and makes their bodies “habituated to external regulation”, which are social norms (Pylypa, 1998: 22). Importantly the chapter shows that the way women feel about themselves is strongly linked with their bodies’ size.

In this chapter female gatherings are identified as one significant place where surveillance is practised in Saudi Arabia. The data showed that slim women feel powerful and superior to fuller women. This can be attributed to symbolic power, which gives a higher social position to slimmer women. This dynamic occurs particularly when women feel the surveillance of other women. This surveillance, which carries judgement, also holds what Bourdieu (1991) refers to as ‘symbolic power’. This symbolic power in their daily life experiences is embedded in women’s judgement of each other, which makes larger women feel embarrassed and ashamed of their bodies.
This chapter dealt with the techniques that women used to manage their weight and appearance. The participants’ narrations about their bodies illustrated that they deal with their bodies as manageable entities that can be controlled. Women participants in this study used diet and exercise to control their bodies to control and adjust body size, and if they were unsuccessful at dieting or controlling their weight with exercise they felt shame and blamed themselves. This is evidence that their bodies are docile and can be “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, 1977a: 136). Dieting and exercise were located as technologies of the self (Bartky, 1988; Chapman, 1997).

Dieting as a technology of the self has been shown for some of the participants to be very effective in reducing a tremendous amount of weight. Importantly, it is shown in this chapter how losing weight through dieting made women feel differently about themselves. The women report feeling more comfortable and satisfied with themselves. To further the analysis of technologies of the self this chapter also located and explored clothing as a way women participants used clothing to either show off their bodies or hide their bodies from surveillance. Wearing loose and long clothing made the larger participants feel more comfortable, less obvious and therefore subject to less judgement, and the chapter located the idea of the invisible body to show how clothing as a technology of self is able to make the body less visible. Larger women in the study also were found to avoid and not choose the newer and trendy fashions which they located as inappropriate for them and for slim women only. Here this chapter has begun to demonstrate that there is market segregation and market exclusion for larger women.

Overall, this chapter revealed the social and cultural factors that motivate women to participate in weight management practices. In addition, dieting and exercise were identified as the primary methods to control weight and the main empirical insights from this chapter offer reasons to explain the new opportunities in the market to fulfil the contemporary social ideals.
Chapter 6: Habitus and bodies

Figure 14 Map of Chapter 6

- Introduction.
- Mothers’ and daughters’ habitus and bodies.
- Family-body Habitus [F5]: Body image disturbance.
- Family-body Habitus [F5]: Fear of Fat.
- Family-body Habitus [F1]: The Physically Active body.
- Family-body Habitus [F2]: Criticizing the Fat body.
- Family-body Habitus [F6]: Husband and Sexual life.
- Summary.
6.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates habitus within the familial context – mother and daughter dyads – and their application of body management practices. It looks at familial level habitus and the dynamic relationship indicated in mothers’ and daughters’ definitions of subjectivity. In this chapter, I will discuss and analyse mothers’ and daughters’ subjectivities and the influence of their relationship in forming their body weight management practices.

A “Mother’s influence is of primary importance in shaping their daughter’s lives” (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 595). As this research is investigating the socio-cultural factors that influence women’s weight management experiences, exploring the mother-daughter relationship in the matter of managing the body is very useful in mapping out these factors and answering the research questions. Here, I would add extra emphasis to the importance of this dimension due to the social and cultural norms in Saudi Arabia, which prioritise the role of the family as the most important social institution. Abudi (2010) claims that in the Middle Eastern world in particular, a child’s personality is more influenced by their mother than in Western societies. Abudi justifies:

In the Arab world, arguably to a greater extent than in the west, the child’s mind and personality are shaped by the mother because during the first seven to nine years of its life, the child is entrusted entirely to the mother (2010: 5).

In that sense, Abudi adds more emphasis on the importance of the family life in Arab world, in particular among mothers and their children. This can also justify the significance of applying the concept of habitus as a tool to explore women’s subjectivities and thus their weight management practices.

6.2 Mothers’ and daughters’ habitus and bodies

In this section I will explore the mother-daughter dyads by analysing each family’s habitus. This helps to understand how women shape their selves and thus their practices and behaviour. In particular, the way that they feel about themselves, whether they are comfortable or not with their bodies, and disciplinary practices they apply to control and construct their body image are considered. Maor and Cwikel suggest that:

Mother-daughter relationships are one of the most significant socio-cultural factors associated with body image, eating disorders and dieting (Maor and Cwikel, 2016: 12).
On the social level, the mother-daughter relationship has an important value, especially to feminists, as “the cathexis between mother and daughter … is the great unwritten story” (Rich, 1984: 225). There is a massive amount of literature on the mother-daughter relationship and its mutual influence, particularly with regard to social body issues (Maor, 2012; Maor and Cwikel, 2016; Chernin, 1985). Feminists have developed theories to articulate the relationship between mother and daughter as an important relationship in women’s lives, as it is “the most intimate, intense and lasting female relationship” (Abudi, 2010: 5). Abudi (2010) argues that this relationship is significant because the mother is responsible for bringing up her children, and thus she contributes to define their subjectivities unlike the father whose duty is to work outside home and earn money.

This idea is compatible with Bourdieu’s notion of the family habitus, as the individual starts building his or her habitus within the family, and under their influence. The mother-daughter relationship that began in childhood has been proven to affect women’s construction of their body image and body identity (Maor, 2012: 98). Reading through participants’ interviews, I noticed a strong link between the daughters’ narrations of their bodies and their mothers’ narrations. Here, I will discuss the dynamics that link mother and daughter bodily narratives. For Bourdieu, the social body represents individuals’ “cultural capital” and functions as cultural capital reproduction (Frank, 2001: 68). Therefore, looking at mother and daughter bodily narratives helps to understand family culture and, more broadly, the society’s culture.

In many cases, there is concord between mothers and daughters in the way they both feel about their body, psychological dis/comfort and the weight management practices it begets. The following sections reveals the aspects of each family habitus that differ between families. I show how family-body habitus operates between mother daughter dyads and how the changed beauty ideal from the older times and the older generation has been reacted to, incorporated and/or resisted by the family.

6.2.1 Family-body Habitus [F5]: Body image disturbance

Within contemporary societies, women are “ideologically duped”, in a Foucauldian sense, by the notion of slimness, as it is widely believed that slimmer women are happier and more “sexually desirable” (Heyes, 2006: 127). That makes obesity carry a social stigma that is linked with being careless, lazy and unattractive (Prohaska and
It is a stigma many women accept. Bordo (2003) discusses the role of the mother-daughter relationship in subjectivity reproduction and bodily practices, although she did not specify constructing disturbance in body image as integrated within this relationship. However, Maor and Cwikel (2016) confirm that the mother-daughter relationship would often result in daughters developing a negative body image if their mothers also had one. This is demonstrated in this section, as I found evidence of Maor and Cwikel’s (2016) claim in my data. First, I discuss Hela’s [MF5] (Beasan’s mother) narration about how she feels about herself to make sense of Beasan’s later narrations. Hela says:

I am uncomfortable with myself because of myself and people around me … I don’t like to wear tight-fitted clothes so I won’t embarrass myself. I don’t like anyone to look at me in an inferior way, I don’t like that. I know myself and my body so I don’t need to embarrass myself by wearing something that doesn’t suit my body. I prefer to wear loose and long dresses … I like to buy clothes that don’t show my body’s curves or fat. Also, I don’t like transparent clothes … Sometimes I see clothes on a mannequin or model and I like them. But when I try on my size it looks ugly on me. I have a conviction that the bigger the dress gets, the uglier it becomes.

Hela is dissatisfied with her body and thus she has a negative body image. She realises that her excess weight is the reason for that feeling. Hela feels guilty and lacks self-confidence because she is overweight as she gained weight gradually during seven pregnancies and did not take care of herself. This resonates with Askegaard et al. (2002) claim that the feeling of ‘guiltiness’ is an outcome of the feeling of doing “something wrong”. However, she was comfortable with her body until slimness has become a contemporary beauty ideal. At that time, Hela developed self-consciousness and body dissatisfaction because her body is not compatible with the contemporary beauty ideals. This is because she has adopted contemporary body ideals about slimness and now evaluates her contemporary self and past self with today’s ideals. In the past she may have felt differently about her body because she did not have today’s ideals. Despite that she was slim in her youth, she did not feel special about it at that time because slimness was not ideal. But when she narrates the past, she used the ‘proud’ language describing herself in the past, though at that time it was not a beauty ideal. Hela is evaluating herself now, and herself in the past from today’s values and attitudes about body ideals.

Now, adopting contemporary beauty ideals, she alters her dispositions. As an indication of her habitus, having a negative body image and her lack of self-esteem are
reflected in her choices of clothing. She confirms that, because she is overweight, she chooses loose and long clothing as a way to adapt to this unpleasant situation. Hela is trying to solve this contradiction between her current body and the beauty ideal by using different technologies. For example, she uses clothing as a technique to conceal her body and feel more comfortable. To sum up, Hela’s bodily disposition here is a negative body image, and for this reason, she tends to hide her body to make it invisible.

Thus, in the structure of her way of thinking, a slim body is the ‘default setting’ for her habitus. However, when she gained weight through time, she had to adjust her position and thoughts in relation to that. As her position – being overweight – is negative to her habitus – slimness as ideal – she feels uncomfortable and criticises herself. This means Hela’s feeling about herself has changed from feeling ‘normal’ to feeling ‘inferior’ to others and uncomfortable with her body.

Dealing with the change of beauty ideals, and the change in her position, Hela has adjusted her habitus in the way she dresses. Giving that habitus is not static and “changes constantly in response to new experiences” (Bourdieu, 2000: 161), Hela has altered her fashion style in order to locate her habitus within new body ideals. The altering in her habitus can be seen in her feeling of knowing how things are and what is natural/the way to do things. Wearing long and loose clothing is an adjusting in her disposition that has happened gradually over time according to the change of her position. Hela’s narration about herself and her body clarifies Beasan’s feelings about her mother.

Beasan [DF5], her 23-year-old daughter, is herself mother to a 3-year-old daughter. She is self-care conscious, and currently her weight is normal. She says she has never struggled with being overweight. She says:

> My body is very important in my life. I don’t like my current body. I feel different in it, even my face has changed with these extra 10 Kg. Yes, my weight is ideal, 52 Kg, but I don’t like the way my body looks because of my belly and the fat distribution in my body … My dream is to wear my wedding dress again and to be back to 42 Kg.

Beasan articulates her dissatisfaction with her body, although she realises that her weight is normal. She is constantly unhappy with and concerned about her body. This resonates with Seid (1989), who postulated that we, as women, are in a constant condition of dissatisfaction about our bodies in terms of weight, shape or tone, even when we have a normal body weight. This is similar to the claim by Davis (1995) that women within the normal weight range usually have an inaccurate or disturbed body image. Hela’s
narration about her body yields insight into the root of Beasan’s (her daughter) feelings about her body. Like her mother, Beasan has a negative body image despite that Beasan is thin. Looking at her mother’s habitus and her feeling about her body can explain Beasan’s current feelings about herself. Beasan narrates her childhood experience and what she remembers regarding her mother’s body and bodily practices:

Since I was little my mother has been overweight, probably because she was a working woman, she didn't have the time to look after herself. I’ve never seen her with a slim and fit body. All of her clothes were long, loose skirts and shirts. At that time, I thought all mothers should look like that, overweight. Once I saw my friend’s mother who is slim, I wondered how a mother could be thin [she laughs], silly girl, I thought all mothers should be fat. I don’t remember her [ever] wearing trousers or jeans. [During the interview, Beasan asked me whether her mother would know what she is saying here, and I replied that it is totally confidential.] I've never seen my mother looking after herself. She has never tried to lose weight or to take care of her appearance. She has had the same hair style and colour since I was a kid, she hasn't changed since then.

Beasan’s narration reveals more details about her mother’s bodily experiences, which her mother did not mention in her narration. Starting from her childhood, Beasan did not have an ‘ideal’ feminine image about her mother; in contrast, it was a negative conception of being a mother. Beasan believes that her mother lacked ‘self-care’, which for Beasan comprises feminine beauty practices that should be taken for granted for all women. These constitute feminine self-care practices by which women make themselves attractive and socially acceptable, such as makeup, clothing and fashion, dieting and exercise, and cosmetic surgery (Markula, 1995). Beasan confirms that her mother does not practise any of these. Thus, she criticises her mother’s excess weight and her lack of feminine self-care, noting that she has never changed her hair or fashion style. This suggests that Beasan internalised a ‘negative image’ about women who are married and mothers.

Beasan is dissatisfied with her mother’s body and appearance. She claims that her mother is aware that she is overweight, and realises the importance of a woman’s body in her social life as well as the inevitability of self-care practices as part of achieving the feminine ideal. However, her mother does not work towards achieving a slim body through diet or exercise. To Beasan, this confirms her mother’s neglect of herself rather than an unawareness of feminine ideals and practices. Beasan says that despite her mother’s awareness of body ideals and femininity requirements, she does not work towards achieving this body herself.
In chapter two, I argued, family habitus, as Bourdieu defines it, is a “subjective but non-individual system of internalized structures, common schemes of perception, conception and action” (Bourdieu, 1989: 60). Both Beasan and her mother have the same ‘common schemes of perception’ about appreciating feminine beauty ideals and a slim body. In addition, they both – mother and daughter – have a disturbed body image. Hela expressed body shame and discomfort due to her being overweight. This notion is being realised by Beasan who expressed her fear of body and weight change as an outcome of growing up in such circumstances.

Beasan distinguishes herself from her mother as she characterises herself as more feminine than her mother. Her justification was that Beasan engages more in self-care practices, and she looks after herself to fulfil femininity norms. Beasan distinguishes herself from her mother in terms of self-care practices, although they both (herself and her mother) have similar definition of beauty ideals. She states:

My mother strongly believes in the importance of a woman’s body in her social life, though she has not taken serious action to reduce her weight or look after herself. I just don’t want to be like her in this aspect, I’m always concerned about my body and take serious steps to control my weight. That’s why I joined Cambridge Diet Centre.

Beasan and her mother have different practices regarding their beliefs. Hela appreciates the body ideal and realises how vital it is to be thin in contemporary society in terms of social relationships and women’s subjectivities. Based on that, Hela’s body does not conform to beauty ideals that make Hela feel uncomfortable about her body. At the same time, Beasan’s body conforms to the beauty ideal, she has a fear about being similar to her mother and letting herself go. What Beasan does not realise is that she shares with her mother a disturbed body image though she is slimmer than her mother. Beasan adds:

I’ve always wanted to be like my mother, taking care of my kids and be a good cook, but more feminine and try to look after myself … I am trying to avoid making the same mistakes as my mother when she was a married woman and a mother, and letting myself go.

Beasan views her mother’s lack of self-care and feminine practices as mistakes that she fears making herself. This is because Beasan recognises the consequences of a lack of self-care to be low self-confidence and a negative body image: “I hate my body though my weight is ideal. I hate this belly”. This negative image of an overweight mother
has influenced Beasan’s view of being a mother. She links the ‘lack of self-care’, by which her mother let herself go, with the concept of being a mother: “I am trying to avoid making the same mistakes as my mother when she was a married woman and a mother, and letting myself go”.

However, she was surprised when she saw her friend’s mother and then she realised that it is possible to be a mother and a slim woman, which is something that she liked. This confusion of how mothers should look, and the possibility of being slim and fit even as a mother magnified her fear of being fat. This is because a larger female body is contrary to beauty ideals, and is considered less feminine, unattractive and ugly (Musaiger et al., 2004). This experience has also raised her awareness and the way she structures the image of a mother. During her childhood, Beasan had the perception that mothers should be overweight after they had children. However, when she saw her friend’s mother and by the time Beasan got married and had a child herself, she realised that being a mother is not about being overweight.

Beasan justifies her fascination with the body and weight and her constant preoccupation with thinness as preventing her from making her mother’s ‘mistake’ of diverting away from the ideal feminine norm. Her motivation for controlling her weight comes from the fear of being in the same position as her mother and losing her sense of femininity. Beasan characterises her mother as being outside the feminine ideal, and she never engages in what is considered as feminine practices. As she said, Beasan was always feminine, has always had a slim body, and she emphasises that by actively engaging in weight management practices. This resonates with Prohaska and Gailey’s (2009) claim that women with a normal body weight are more dissatisfied with their bodies, and therefore are keen on losing weight. This is because they have lived in the femininity ideal and they are afraid of losing it. Beasan says:

My body is very important in my life. I’ve never been overweight, I was always rather underweight. I never felt any pressure until I was pregnant. Afterwards, I tried hard to go back again to my previous weight.

Her childhood experiences with her mother as well as being underweight and then having a normal weight have accumulated in Beasan’s habitus that manifested in the way she perceives motherhood. Her mother’s body is reflected as a disturbance in her body image, namely the fear of becoming fat, and therefore in her constant worry about her weight. This illustrates Bourdieu’s claim that an individual’s current practice is ‘present
past’ (Jenkins, 1992), meaning that Beasan’s current practices, behaviour and feelings are a result of her past experiences. Hence, Beasan’s current feelings about her body and the practices she is applying to manage her body are the result of her past and her childhood experiences regarding her mother’s body. Beasan’s fear of being like her mother resonates with Brown-Guillory’s statement that “sometimes the daughter rejects her mother’s values as inappropriate to her reality” (1996: 2). Beasan rejects her mother’s values from the past which she sees in not taking action to lose weight. Beasan’s reality is to deny being overweight and to seek to be a slim mother. She confirmed this reality by expressing constant concern about her weight and appearance.

For Beasan, being underweight means being better, happier, more confident and psychologically comfortable. To stay within her comfort zone, Beasan does not accept the natural change in her body after having a baby. Going from being underweight to a normal weight was not acceptable for Beasan. This is because being underweight keeps her safe, and she feels that she is far from being overweight. This buffer diminishes as she gains some weight during pregnancy, putting her within a normal weight range. This emphasis on the negative body image that she has had since childhood, passed on to her by her mother, gives her great motivation to get back to her comfort zone. Beasan took preventive steps in order to avoid her mother’s weight struggle. This resonates with Fairburn and Garner (1988) that women are preoccupied with thinness at the same time they ‘fear’ fatness and, therefore, they are trying to avoid it. In Beasan’s and Hela’s case, we can see how the complication of the notion of body ideal exceeds the limits of beauty to construct the perceived image of marriage and motherhood. In the Western context, slimness and looking good is important for social status and professional work status for women. In addition to that, my data demonstrates the significance of woman’s body in marital life.

### 6.2.2 Family-body Habitus [F5]: Fear of fat

In contemporary societies, thin women develop a fear of “getting fat” (Bordo, 2003: 141), which is a key theme embedded in Beasan’s narration. This sort of feeling, the fear of getting fat, is becoming more and more pervasive among women, to the extent that it actually changes “the way the brain works” (Wolf, 1990: 121). Beasan traced her constant concern and fear of being big or fat to her mother. The narrative about her mother and her ‘mistakes’ justifies Beasan’s fear of gaining weight. The fear of becoming fat has
been frequently linked with eating disorders and negative body image (Levitt, 2003). Here, I will not classify dieting as an eating disorder, but rather as a weight management practice that limits an individual’s food choices. Levitt (2003) argues that individuals who develop a fear of fat usually have a body image disturbance. This confirms Beasan’s situation regarding her body image disturbance. Her fear of fat has developed from her dissatisfaction with her mother’s body and appearance. This caused her to be highly appreciative of slim bodies and motivates her to try to achieve one.

Understanding her fear of fat and body image disturbance can explain Beasan’s motivation for participating in weight management practices. Her mother’s influence is not directly seen on Beasan’s behaviour, but rather is inscribed in her attitudes, through pathways, language used and applied in her storytelling to herself, unsaid looks, deep knowing of her mother’s self-care practices, the doings and knowing that are taken for granted but are shown through the storying Beasan has shared with me. The experience of having an overweight mother has influenced the way she looks at herself and builds her body image. In her current behaviour, Beasan unconsciously reflects the habitus she has constructed based on her childhood experience with her overweight mother. Notably, body image disturbance is not related to weight. Despite being slim and underweight, Beasan still developed a negative body image that made her always uncomfortable about her body.

Consequently, Beasan sought a solution to get her out of her uncomfortable situation and get back to being underweight. She joined a diet centre which relies on a very low calorie intake to get her body under control and lose unwanted weight. This case reminds us of Chernin’s claim:

For a daughter whose mother’s life has made this impression on her, the act of eating will be fraught with peril. With every bite she has to fear that she may become what her mother has been (1985:42).

Thus, Beasan’s relationship with food is based on fear, because in her mind, if she does not diet and lets herself go, she will arrive at the same result as her mother, which she does not like. Regarding the fear to be similar to her mother, Beasan comments:

Since I was a little girl my mother used to be overweight…probably because she was working she didn't had the time to look after herself … I've never seen her slim … She diets for a couple of days then she breaks it. Honestly, she has odd beliefs, she says if I don’t eat bread I would have a headache. What is that? This is wrong; there is no scientific proof of what she is saying. I think if she kept staying home without physical activities and without a diet, she might get a more serious illness than a
headache. I just don’t want to reach this point. This is why I’m dieting now and watching my weight before I get older, because then it will be very hard, like my mom, to lose weight.

In Beasan’s narration, she construes that her mother is aware of contemporary beauty ideals though she is not working hard to achieve these. Her critical narration about her mother’s body and negligence of self-care have strongly formed the way Beasan defines herself. Despite that she has never been overweight, she unconsciously expresses her fear of fat. Beasan says:

I'm not used to this body; I am not used to this appearance. Because since I was a child until and I got married, I was slim. There wasn't any phase of my life when I was chubby … Now I am 80% happy with my body. If anyone asks me about my weight, definitely I will reply that I am proud of my weight. My weight is 51 Kg. However, I don’t like my belly after having my daughter. I have been always happy and comfortable with my body during my life until I had my daughter. Now I am adapting to my new body through clothing. I try to wear something that hides my belly and makes it invisible. Though I can find my size easily, no problem with that. But to be honest, outfits look different on each body size … That’s why I took a serious decision to join Cambridge Diet Centre.

Despite that Beasan has never been fat, she articulated a ‘fat subjectivity’ based on her childhood experience about her mother. Indeed, mothers play a major role in forming their daughters’ ‘fat’ identity (Maor, 2012). Beasan compares herself to how she looked in the past, which gives her a strong internal feeling of abnormality. Despite currently having a normal weight, she cannot accept any change in her weight that moves her towards her sense of abnormality. In that sense, Beasan “refrain[s] from doing what would categorize [her], in [her] own eyes, as abnormal” (Vaz and Bruno, 2003: 278).

Beasan has tried to control her weight by joining a diet centre “to obtain the desired extremely slender body rather than accept the natural dimensions of [her own body]” (Markula, 1995: 238). The process that Beasan is going through indicates that she is resisting the natural change in her body, related to the birth of her first child, due to her disturbed body image which developed her fear of fat. This is because she previously had a slim body, on account of which she possessed the feminine ideal. Any change in that reminds her of her mother, which she cannot accept.

Another key aspect of Beasan’s narration is evidenced in her narration of the media. Interpreting her claim, I found that the ideal female body that is represented in the media is a contributing factor in body image disturbance. Beasan explained that “the perfect body image I have in my mind, that I want to have, is to be like TV actresses, they
really have beautiful bodies”. Here, I see that the media is playing a role in Beasan’s body image disturbance. Beale et al. (2016: 69) claim that “body image disturbance result[s] from thin-ideal exposure”. Although she has a normal body, the images she sees in the media have contributed to distorting her body image, as “the impact of movies, television and mass culture in general has created a population responsive to imitate and take up the received images of femininity” (Orbach, 2005: 53). This is obvious in Beasan’s narration, as she aims to achieve a slim body similar to those of women presented in the media.

Beasan constructed an image of a typical Saudi mother based on her own mother. In so doing, she built her bodily disposition around the distorted body image that is shaped by her mother. Her perception of her mother, as well as her experience, is similar to that of another participant, Nora. Nora’s experience with her mother was also the basis for her construction of a general image of Saudi mothers. She says, “I don’t know why our mothers are like that! Most Saudi mothers are overweight [laughing], I don’t know why! Please tell me when you finish the study!” Both Beasan and Nora refer to some factors that have affected this change. All of the participants agreed on the huge influence of the media in constructing new norms and beauty ideals in society. Featherstone (1991: 170) confirmed that images and pictures in the media affect consumer culture, as they “provide a proliferation of stylised images of the body”.

Another aspect that reflects this family’s habitus is clothing. It is clear that the mother’s disturbed body image has been replicated in her daughter. When Beasan felt she had lost her feminine ideal as she gained weight, she repeated her mother’s strategy of hiding her body’s curves with clothing. Here, the practice is being reproduced by Beasan unconsciously. This demonstrates that the family’s habitus is being reproduced. They both use the same technique to conceal their disturbed body image, using clothing to “mask or alter [their] body shapes” (Markula, 1995: 237). This was also something I observed in this family’s gathering. Their clothing style was modest and covered more than other families. I can conclude that the mother’s disturbed body image influenced her daughter to hide her curves. This indicates that it is not only the women’s style or how they dress, but also how they see themselves and their body image.

6.2.3 Family-body Habitus [F1]: The physically active body

Reading through mother-daughter pairs of transcripts, I observed specific family patterns which illustrate their family habitus and dispositions to certain bodily practices.
Despite there being individual differences within each family, an overall habitus can be illustrated. Here, I will discuss Rawda’s [MF1] and Neda’s [DF1] family as a representative example. In this family, I noticed that they illustrate a great disposition to physical activities. The ideal body image they illustrated differs from the ideal body image described by other women, which is a stick-thin body. The perfect body, according to this family, is fit, toned and curvy rather than simply thin. For Rawda, the ideal body is “toned, flat belly, tight round breasts and tight bum”.

Rawda’s appreciation for and pursuit of this particular idea of a perfect body is not a new issue for her. Unlike other participants, she has not developed this sense recently on the basis of contemporary ideals, but rather has had this attitude inscribed in her habitus since an early age. As described in the previous chapter, Rawda was ahead of her time in terms of looking after her body and exercising when no one else did. What she had been concerned with when she was fifteen was not considered by the wider society until it became trendy thirty years later. This suggests that Rawda is more liberal, open minded and westernised in her way of thinking. She says, “When I was a young girl, belly dancing was my favourite exercise. I loved to dance because I wanted my body be fit, curvy and toned”.

The way she values self-care and this body ideal was clear in her expressed dislike of supermodels’ bodies which she finds super-thin and there is no ‘sexiness’ in them. This runs counter to the opinions of most of the other participants. She states:

Personally, I dislike supermodels’ bodies, they are super-thin. All of their bodies’ parts are thin, like the breasts, bum and haunch. My daughters’ sizes could go down to x-small, but they have breasts, bums, I mean you can see their curvy bodies. Supermodels’ bodies are not perfect and not ideal. Yet the designs they’re modelling would look much better on a curvy body ... Unfortunately, many people like these bodies, though they are not beautiful and not healthy. They have no breasts or bum, a woman should have some curves ... The perfect body is not only about being slim and thin, no, it has to be toned and firm. Belly, thighs, arms should be toned and not flabby, and firm breasts. It is beautiful to have curves with a toned body. At the same time, a super thin body is not attractive and not sexy.

Rawda’s comments resonate with Markula’s definition of the ideal feminine body image as “shapely, slender, and softly curvy” (1995: 242). Yet this body type is not identical to the contemporary thin female body ideal in Saudi Arabia, as other participants narrated. Rawda acknowledges the difference between her perspective of the perfect body and that of other women when she says, ‘Unfortunately, many people like these bodies’.
She appreciates a tighter and more toned body, which the other participants did not indicate was a matter of concern to them. Rawda’s view of the body resonates with the contemporary body ideals in Western societies. For example, Bordo discussed the recent shift in the body ideal from extremely thin to a “tighter, smoother” body in Western societies (Bordo, 2003: 188).

Here, I find Markula’s (1995) study relevant, as Rawda exercises intensively, and yet she and her daughter Neda were the only participants who exercised and expressed passion for exercising. Rawda says:

I exercise three hours a day, but, really, I would like to exercise more to lose more weight and be more toned. I am OK with my body; I’m looking to be better. Exercising is very important to keep me fit and toned.

Unlike other participant mothers, who appreciate slim bodies (though do not work to achieve their ideal), Rawda has an ideal body image in her mind, and she exercises intensively to maintain good health and her fit body. She also follows a healthy diet and lifestyle alongside exercising to achieve this perfect body. For Rawda, joining a gym is a way to help her fulfil society’s demands of women’s bodies. Rawda has developed this disposition since she was young, but the recent phenomenon has added emphasis to her belief:

Since I was a teenager I used to watch my food and exercise so as to maintain a fit body, [which] no one did at that time. But nowadays women have become more aware about their bodies and appearance and started to be more concerned about dieting and exercise, more than before.

Rawda added that she exercises to lose weight in addition to maintain a well-toned body. The gym is an essential part of her daily life. She goes to the gym to lose weight and also to tone her body. Markula (1995) discussed the female body ideal from the perspective of exercising, addressing how women who exercise on a regular basis experience their bodies in everyday life. Markula (1995) found that women who exercise are firstly concerned about losing weight and then toning their bodies. However, due to some social or health circumstances, such as Ramadan – the month of fasting – Rawda postpones exercising. This causes her to put on some weight. She says:

Whenever I put on weight or my belly gets obvious, my children say, “Mom, what happened? Go back to the gym, you used to have an athletic body that was better”.

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This comment highlights the family’s disposition to the ideal body. Thus, she exercises to lose weight and maintain her toned, fit body. Rawda and her family’s ideal body image has shifted from only size and weight to include a toned shape. She always has been within the normal body weight range, never exceeding it, and for this reason her children are used to seeing her with a fit, slim body. Moreover, because she is always exercising, her children have constructed the perfect body image for their mother. They know that the technique their mother uses to keep her body fit is exercising. Thus, they straight away told her to use this method to get back to her fit shape.

Looking at Neda’s narration, she expressed her passion with a different type of exercise though she claimed her difference to her mother. Neda narrates:

My mom loves to exercise but I don’t. I love horseback riding and only horseback riding. I tried to do some belly exercises however I quit it after a couple of weeks … I joined the gym with my mom and I paid the fees for one year, I went three times only. I hate the idea of exercising in a ‘closed’ area. I prefer the open places such as an equestrian venue – I feel free when I go there. I don’t mind going there every single day. My legs and thighs are toned, my back and shoulders became stronger.

Neda is passionate about this sport physically and emotionally. Neda and her mother Rawda emphasised the importance of achieving a toned and tight body through exercising. Hence, they exercise and take part in sport as a technique to lose weight and tone the body. Despite that they both classify themselves as having a normal or fit body, managing their bodies by physical activity is crucial to them. Rawda exercises fifteen hours a week to maintain her fitness. Markula suggests, “Women [who] exercise excessively (6 or more hours per week) view their bodies negatively although they are not heavier than others” (1995: 238). This was evident in Rawda’s constant feeling of dissatisfaction with her body, which is why she keeps working out to be fit.

As for the daughter in this pair, Neda classifies herself as different to her mother. She justifies the difference based on the distinction in their body management practices. However, Neda does not realise the ‘shared habitus’ which can be seen in their high engagement in physical activities and appreciation of a certain body image. Unlike her mother, Neda hates exercising and going to the gym, although she is fascinated by horseback riding. She finds this sport important for her physical and psychological condition. Participating in horseback riding emphasises her belief about the perfect body and helps her to achieve it. Comparable to her mother, Neda appreciates a toned and curvy body rather than just a slim body. She narrates:
If I go to a social occasion and see a beautiful lady with a gorgeous-looking and slim body, flat belly, and toned breasts, round bum, I will admire her, and I will say to myself, “Look at her flat belly and perfect breasts”. But if the lady is fat, men would say, “What is this?” And they will never ever think about her. And if any fat lady wears a short dress, people will look at her and say, “How confident you are!” Let’s say if you saw a woman with a beautiful body, will you not be jealous? I will look at her body and say, “I wish I had her body”. No one would wish to be fat, nor have a flat body without any breasts and curves. My brother broke up with his fiancé because of her body … After several months of engagement, he decided not to continue with her. The reason was her body! Yes, her body, which was not toned, especially the arms, thighs and breasts, though she wasn’t fat. He assumed that when she has the first baby, she will be overweight and flabby!

Neda expressed her own understanding about the ideal body. Her narration indicates her family habitus in that they share the same interpretation of what constitutes the ideal woman’s body. She describes the perfect body as curvy, toned and tight. She also mentioned her dislike for an extremely thin body.

Again, this is not the image of an ideal body common amongst the other participants. To illustrate her account of how a perfect woman’s body should look, she gave the example of two contrasting bodies, one of them with her ideal body image and the other with the opposite. Also, she reflects on her family members’ views of perfect body. She narrated her brother’s experience with his fiancé. This reveals more about this family’s habitus and how they all have a similar view. Among Rawda’s family, sons and daughter, the disposition is to appreciate a toned and tight body rather than only a slim body. It is evident in the sons’ comments on their mother’s body and also in the criteria they are looking for in a future wife.

Comparing Rawda with her daughter Neda, we can see the family habitus, which revolves around the body as a project for their lives. Both mother and daughter work towards attaining the perfect body with different methods. Rawda is passionate about her body, and for this reason she extensively exercises and diets. Neda has a similar approach to her mother although she applies different practices. She loves horseback riding and its role in keeping her fit and toned. That is to say, there are parallels between horseback riding for the daughter and going to the gym for the mother, which reveal some of their family habitus. In their narrations, they both idealised women’s bodies in a certain image. They both narrated the same image, although they were interviewed separately. Both expressed their image of the perfect body and the way to achieve it.
What distinguishes this family’s definition of the ideal body from that of other families is exercising and the preoccupation with a tight, toned and athletic body. All family members – mother, daughters and sons – have expressed in many ways the same interest or appreciation of the ideal woman’s body. In addition, they all – based on Rawda’s and Neda’s narrations – showed the importance of exercising as a technology of the self and a disciplinary practice that help a woman to fulfil this ideal body. As Markula concluded, diet and weight loss have become insufficient for women to have the ideal body. Rather, more women want to have “an athletic, tight look” (1995: 238).

This notion is not common among all of the participants. I found it very specific for this family because they have the basis for developing this disposition. Rawda and her daughter Neda both have an ideal weight, but they are concerned about their body shape. The image they have of the perfect body is not exclusive only to mother and daughter, as the sons of this family seem to share it as well. This is because women’s bodies which are “soft, loose, or ‘wiggly’ are unacceptable” (Bordo, 2003: 190) for members of this family. Thus, Rawda’s and Neda’s physical activities are important to them because it allows them to achieve the toned body they appreciate as ideal.

6.2.4 Family-body Habitus [F2]: Criticising the fat body

In this section, I will represent F2 as another example of family-body habitus. Reading through this family’s transcripts, I see criticizing the fat body is verbally obvious. Layal [MF2] and her daughter Hanan [DF2] were critical of each other’s bodies and of their own bodies. The case of Layal and Hanan illustrates how family habitus can present in the way that mother and daughter construct their body and in their degree of body comfort and satisfaction. The mother, Layal, classifies herself and is classified by others as having a normal body. Her narration shows that she is nevertheless uncomfortable with her body. Layal says:

I am comfortable with my body, except these sides’ flab. I don’t like them. My daughters and son say, “Mama, your body is OK, you’ve never been overweight”. Even my sisters and friends always know me as having a normal body. However, I don’t like my sides, they are ugly. I always try to hide them with loose clothing … when I go shopping, I look for clothes that cover unpleasant parts of my body … I really like supermodels’ bodies, I wish I had their body.

In her narration, Layal expressed uncertainty about her feeling about her body. First, she articulates her comfort with her body, owing to the fact that her weight is within
the normal range. She wanted to prove that this is not only her own evaluation of her body, but that others around her also see her as having a normal body. Despite her sides being flabby, this is not obvious to people and she has not received comments about it except from her daughters when she gains some weight. Still, she is unconvinced about her good body. In fact, she tries to find imperfections in her body and lives with that discomfort. Comfort with one’s body is defined by Holliday as:

One feels from the degree of fit between the outside of one’s body and its inside (not blood, guts or organs, but the ‘imagined’ or ‘true’ self) – the way in which identity is mapped onto the body. Comfort means, in this case, expressing externally that which one feels inside (1999: 481).

People around Layal confirm the appropriateness of her appearance, including her daughters, who note that she has never been overweight. This positive feedback should increase her confidence about her appearance. However, she is focusing on her body’s imperfections, making this a main concern. This reveals her habitus, that she prefers to appear in the best way and is always anxious about perfection. Her narration indicates her awareness of criticism. Thus, she does not want to be in a situation where others criticise her body.

Unlike Hela, who articulated her ‘body shame’ and body discomfort due to being overweight, Layal has a normal weight but is nevertheless uncomfortable with it. Her internalizing the social body ideal reflects her cultural capital. Understanding social norms gives her the ‘feeling of the game’. By that I mean that Layal knows how society operates which is ‘the rules of the game’ and so she behaves accordingly. Her example shows us that the way she acquired the necessary dispositions required by the habitus of being in contemporary society indicated a highly developed ‘feel for the game’. Not totally in harmony with social beauty ideals, Layal shows discomfort regarding her body. Thus, she links her bodily comfort with having a slim body without any flab or imperfections.

This feeling of being dissatisfied with the body is also evident in her daughter’s (Hanan) narration when she expresses her feelings about her body:

I am totally dissatisfied with my body, I just don’t feel comfortable with my body at all. I have started to put on weight gradually. I’ve put on 15 to 20 Kg in the past 3 years. I feel ashamed, I feel shame about my body. I’m totally unhappy with my weight. I am very, very, very upset about it. When I see a thin woman wearing very nice clothing, I feel jealous because I can’t wear clothes like that because of my body. I say to myself, if only I had her body, I would wear even nicer clothes than her… When
I go shopping, I see many different clothes that I can mix and match with each other and they are beautiful but unfortunately, I can’t buy them because of my body. If I buy them they will look ugly on me … I really don’t like my body and I want to lose weight. Suddenly I’m bloated like a balloon.

Unlike her mother, Hanan is considered obese according to a dietitian’s assessment, and by herself. However, she shares a similar disposition with her mother. She has expressed her dissatisfaction and lack of confidence with her body and she refers to herself as being overweight. Due to her body size, Hanan cannot wear her preferred clothes. She expresses the feeling of being constrained within her body and not feeling free. She sees freedom in choosing nice clothes and wearing them comfortably on a fit body. Feeling ashamed indicates feelings of inferiority and her feeling of lack of social acceptance and appreciation. This is based on not having a fit body that conforms to social norms. She says:

I wanted to lose weight just for my mom, she kept saying you have to lose weight to look better and get married. My mother booked me an appointment with a nutritionist. I wanted to lose weight just for my mum. She talks about body and weight so frequently, three to four times a week, every day non-stop. She always says, “This weight is not good for you. You joined a diet centre and still haven’t lost weight yet … who will marry you? You will not be able to get married, you, you, you”. Mum literally never stops, never stops saying, “Look at your body, watch what you are eating” … When she says that, I tell her, “You lose some weight because your body is not fit, your upper body part is slim and the lower part is fuller, look at yourself” … Three years ago she followed a diet with a dietitian and these sides disappeared. But after a while, she put on weight again and her sides came back again. My point is, my mother should look after her body before asking me to do so … I tell her, “Why don’t you encourage me to lose weight together with you? If you don’t do it yourself how would you like me to do it?”. She is my role model, she is my mother and she is too lazy to do that. Even if I do it for a month or two, at the end I will stop because I don’t have support from [her].

Direct comment and criticism by her mother is obvious in her narration. Hanan articulates her mother commenting on her body. During the interview, Hanan kept mentioning her mother on many occasions. This is because “overweight persons cannot separate themselves from familial demands and expectations” (Spitzack, 1990: 84). She articulated her discomfort with her body even in the most comfortable place, her home. According to her, being fat justifies her feelings of inferiority. This makes Hanan feel angry about the contentious way that her mother mentions and criticises her body. Layal, in her own view, is trying to be a good mother by monitoring Hanan to ensure a good presentation of her within society (Spitzack, 1990). This is because the daughter is seen as an ‘extension’ of the mother that can resemble her in society (Spitzack, 1990: 92).
Layal wants the reflection of her own image to be seen on her daughter Hanan. This is because “a failure to govern is equally worthy of condemnation because a daughter’s appearance points directly to a mother’s capacity for self-governance” (Spitzack, 1990: 92). Here, I argue that Layal is trying to control her self-extension by controlling and watching Hanan. Therefore, succeeding in managing and controlling Hanan’s body would indicate her success as a mother. However, Hanan does not see her mother’s pressure as part of being a good mother.

Thus, Hanan tried to respond to her mother in a similar way, criticising her and asking her to lose weight too. This could be indicative of Hanan’s feeling of oppression by her mother and her rejection of her mother’s use of authority over her. Hanan believes that her mother is being aggressive and unkind in the way she watches over her body. Nonetheless, I can see family habitus here that is indicated in their comments and criticism of each other’s bodies. Hanan is copying her mother’s way of criticising, and practising it on her mother. She is not doing this intentionally; rather, she was explaining how a mother should support her daughter not only in terms of giving advice but also by practising and providing tangible help in the form of dieting together and joining the gym together.

For Hanan, her mother is a “‘guide and guru’ in the process of body watching” (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 73). Mothers who are judgemental of their daughters’ bodies would comment and steer the daughters to lose weight even by taking them to dietitians in order to lose weight (Hesse-Biber, 1996; Maor, 2012). This suggests that mothers practice their symbolic power over their daughters in a way that increases the daughters’ feeling of subordination and dissatisfaction with their bodies. This also resonates with Hesse-Biber’s respondent Helen, who described her mother’s pressure in monitoring her body:

She was critical of my body … she calls me a moose, and that hurt … I can see that all her pushing me has gotten me where I am. At my house, we get on the scale every day. And my mother will ask, ‘What do you weigh?’ When I’m home I drop weight, because my mother is always on my back. When we go out to eat, she tells me what I should order. When I look fine, my mother says nothing about my body, not even a compliment. But when I start gaining weight, the criticism begins (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 73).

Similarity is apparent in the pressure that mothers put on their daughters to have a beautiful body. Despite belonging to different cultural backgrounds and different generations, Hanan and Helen both shared the same sort of pressure from their mothers about achieving beautiful bodies. Hanan justifies her reasons for wanting to lose weight.
In terms of what she articulates, she only wants to lose weight to please her mother. In reality, however, she doesn’t feel happy or comfortable with her body. She is upset about her body because she cannot wear the clothing she likes. When Hanan talked about her mother, she described her as being slim.

Although Hanan’s mother Layal does not have a large body like her daughter, she still has the same body discomfort. They have different body sizes – normal and obese – but the discomfort and body shame regarding specific parts of their bodies, which they monitor through self-surveillance, has resulted in “greater dissatisfaction with specific aspects or parts of the body” (Fiissel and Lafreniere, 2006: 329). Layal magnifies Hanan’s feeling of subordination, which enhances her body dissatisfaction. That is to say, the mother-daughter relationship functions within their “social development” (Spitzack, 1990: 87). In this family, the mother’s symbolic power is obvious on her daughter by constant commenting on her fat body. This shows their disposition for being in constant dissatisfaction about their bodies. As Layal comments on Hanan’s body all the time, Hanan did the same when she had the chance and her mother put on some weight. This can reveal an aspect of their family habitus of constant criticizing of body imperfection. Furthermore, the negative comments of the mother to her daughter increase her feelings of subordination and discomfort with her body, even at home.

These aspects can be seen as motivation for Hanan to lose weight and thus justify Hanan’s constant dissatisfaction with her body and her continuous seeking for a solution that would help her to gain body comfort. Hence, she has tried a variety of practices in order to break the subordination loop, including joining a diet centre and a gym. Having a large body makes Hanan feel uncomfortable and dissatisfies her because “fat is no longer an objective word meaning adipose tissue. It is a word heavily laden with negative value and discomforting emotions” (Orbach, 2006: xii). This nagging and pressure increases Hanan’s discomfort and dissatisfaction with her body and motivates her to lose weight just to please her mother. Hanan continues:

Some people say you have to lose weight to get married. I’m not comfortable with my body then I have to lose weight. When someone jokes with me and touches my belly fat, I feel embarrassed. Being fat isn’t comfortable, even at home. I can’t feel comfortable in casual clothes such as leggings and t-shirts, as this shows my flab which really doesn’t look good. Well, the appearance of a fat woman is horrible and unpleasant.

Hanan expressed her feeling in the third person and did not refer to herself. She described it more generally with the phrase ‘fat woman’. She narrated her own
experience, but from a distance. She described the isolation, embarrassment, and scorn by society for being fat. This means she lacks the important element to be socially accepted and appreciated. Feeling rejected and unwelcomed by society emphasises her feeling of being uncomfortable and dissatisfied with her body. This is evidence of surveillance and symbolic power against fat women among society. In that matter, accepting symbolic power can be seen in the feeling of dissatisfaction. Symbolic power emphasises Hanan’s feeling of subordination which is “a medium and outcome of lack. The lack justifies the subordination, which in turn reproduces the lack” (Frank, 2001: 55).

Hanan expresses her subordination to other women by articulating her jealousy of other women’s bodies and their ability to wear whatever they like: “When I see a thin woman wearing very nice clothing, I feel jealous because I can’t wear clothes like that because of my body”. She expressed her body dissatisfaction through ‘jealousy’ of slim women as they have more options in terms of clothing designs to choose from, and that clothes in general look better on them. Linking the body with the feeling of shame is not something unusual; rather it is common among many women, in one way or another, to feel ashamed of their bodies and appearance (Davis, 1995). Hanan’s justification for feeling ashamed is the social gaze that rejects her current body. All of her negative feelings about her body are based on what society expects from her as well as the pressure from her mother. Indeed, her mother’s constant commenting about her body regarding her chances for marriage, and limited choice of clothing, which is her passion, are all reasons for Hanan to feel uncomfortable with her body. For Hanan, it is not only about being fat, but the other issues enumerated above are also highly significant. Hanan narrates a story that shows her mother’s role in her body discomfort, as she always reminds Hanan about her body and weight and pushes her to lose weight.

6.2.5 Family-body Habitus [F6]: Husband and sexual life

According to many studies, one of the prominent reasons for women’s concern about their bodies and appearance is to attract men’s attention. Thus, men’s opinion and evaluation of women’s bodies can be used as a measuring tool for women’s appearance (Hesse-Biber, 1996). Fadiah [MF6] and her daughter Faten [DF6] showed similar notions, as they give special importance to the man’s satisfaction in their lives. Fadiah asserts that the ‘man’ is the first and foremost aim for the woman to look after her body and maintain a healthy weight. Her point of view is compatible with Dworkin’s (1974)
claim that women often take care of themselves in order to please men. As will be explained in the following paragraphs, Fadiah prioritises and dedicates herself to satisfying her husband. In the interview, Fadiah did not focus on herself, preferring to say ‘we’ to include all women rather than ‘I’ to mean only herself:

A woman should look after herself for her husband in the first place … This is because he is her lover and he wants to see her beauty and her sexy body. But if she was overweight, he would say, “What is that fat body, she looks like an elephant”. Women have realised that in the past. Man is the reason why women have changed. This is because his look at her is a purely sexual gaze, and he wants to enjoy everything in her body. Why does the husband tend to marry another woman? Because of his wife’s neglect of herself. When a woman becomes overweight, she starts to develop illnesses and thus she won't be that attractive for sex. Here, the husband starts looking for another woman who meets his sexual needs, thus, obese women don’t get married at all because no one wants to marry a fat woman. All her beauty attributes are hidden underneath the layers of fat. Many obese women who I personally know did not get married because of their weight.

Based on men’s preferences about women’s bodies, Fadiah sees the body ideal in what men are interested in. She internalised the male gaze – male eyes – in evaluating women’s bodies. She is expressing her opinion from a man’s point of view, as she believes women are created for men’s pleasure. This resonates with Giovanelli and Ostertage (2009), who claim that women internalise the male gaze, constantly monitoring and judging themselves accordingly. Women are always concerned about how men perceive and judge their bodies and appearance. Thus, they try to fulfil men’s demands of women. Fadiah’s main focus and interpretation when she describes women’s bodies is men, particularly the husband, as she centres her life on her husband’s pleasure. She points to men’s satisfaction in order to explain why it is necessary for women to look after their bodies, because “a woman … is judged almost entirely in terms of her appearance, her attractiveness to men” (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 17). Fadiah has this approach of assessing and judging women’s bodies as “women thus learn to understand their bodies as objects, subsequently engaging in self-monitoring in anticipation of how men will judge their appearance” (Riley et al., 2016: 95).

Fadiah blames women for men’s dissatisfaction rather than social norms. She discards women’s excuses to neglect themselves, believing that they must always work at satisfying their husbands. Fadiah adopts this idea of internalizing men’s gaze and judging women’s bodies and appearances based on men’s evaluations. Fadiah’s view provides evidence of Spitzack’s argument that women internalise the male gaze. Spitzack
suggests that “women become men” by adopting men’s values and criteria for judgement, assessing themselves according to these values as if they were being judged by men (1990: 53 emphasis in original).

Fadiah also believes that the husband is the most important person in a woman’s life and that she has to do everything possible to satisfy him. This dimension of the importance of men’s gaze and evaluation of women’s bodies can be seen in a different cultural and generational context. For example, Fadiah’s view resonates with Hesse-Biber’s (1996) argument that women’s dedication and extensive self-care are undertaken only to satisfy their husbands. This disposition of high concern about satisfying men indicates their daily lived symbolic power. In Fadiah’s case, the authority that men have of marrying another wife constitutes a significant concern for them. Consequently, the emphasis on satisfying the husband is an issue that their life centred upon. This indicates the direct and strong link between men and their controlling of women’s bodies.

Moreover, Fadiah was audacious in articulating the importance of her body in her sexual life, or more generally between husbands and wives. In Saudi society, sex is discussed only ambiguously and rarely (Le Renard, 2014). The society sees the intimate relationship and sexuality as red lines that should not be explicitly mentioned. Despite the fact that “sexual morality is required within all social roles, with women’s modesty more strictly guarded than men’s” (Tawfiq and Ogle, 2013: 276), including discussions between women, Fadiah expressed the details of this issue in an explicit way, even though it is unusual to hear someone discuss them so pointedly in Saudi society. She states:

A woman’s body affects her private life. For instance, in sex sometimes, the husband wants to change the position and hold her to have sex while they are standing, he wants to hold her up. If she was overweight, he won't be able to do that. Sex nowadays is different than it was in the past, where it was only limited to the bed and one position. Now, the man wants to see his wife wearing sexy lingerie that reveals the lure of her body. He wants her to dance for him and to be sexy. This is what men are looking for in women.

As Spitzack wrote, “Women are required to be physically appealing in order to participate in romantic life” (1990: 132 emphasis in original). In Fadiah’s narration, she prioritises the sexual, romantic life as the basis of the husband and wife relationship, which she expresses in detail. This requires, according to Fadiah, the woman to look after herself and her body. Fadiah puts a great emphasis on sexualising the female body in favour of men’s satisfaction, and for this reason, women should regulate and discipline
their bodies. Fadiah’s view, from a feminist perspective, would indicate her acceptance of women’s inferiority to men on account of the way she sexualises their bodies. Such a position makes a woman ‘an object’ that belongs to man. This has been discussed by De Beauvoir:

> When woman is given over to a man as his property, he demands that she represent the flesh purely for its own sake. Her body is not perceived as the radiation of a subjective personality, but as a thing sunk in its own immanence; it is not for such a body to have reference to the rest of the world (De Beauvoir, 1968: 189).

De Beauvoir’s discussion about objectifying and sexualising women’s bodies resonates with Fadiah’s account of women’s bodies. She sees women as the property of men, for their pleasure, and that this is the man’s right. Sexualising the female body for the man’s pleasure is not a case that can be applied to men. Fadiah believes that the woman and her body is ‘owned’ by her husband and she has to work hard to please him. A beautiful woman who has a beautiful body “confers additional status on a man by implying his command over it” (Orbach, 2005: 51). This reveals an unarticulated side of socio-cultural factors that influence women’s subjectivities and thus their bodies. Here, Fadiah is articulating a tacit social issue for women. As these are hidden details that women are generally not able to reveal due to social and cultural values, Fadiah was the only woman who spoke freely about an important issue in many women’s lives which they do not articulate. By comparison, other participants spoke very briefly about the role of men in their lives, merely confirming the importance of men in shaping their lives and their view of their bodies, without giving specifics.

Despite her view of the vital role of men in forming women’s opinions about their bodies, Fadiah did not give the same importance to men’s bodies. This makes it quite clear that Fadiah, as a woman, accepts and legitimises men’s symbolic power over women’s bodies, and believes that women should obey this sort of power over their bodies. Her narration implicitly carries consent for men’s domination of women’s bodies by accepting the sexualisation of the female body which is a result of “the biological differences between the male and female bodies [upon which] the edifice of gender inequality is built and legitimised” (McNay, 1992: 17). Accordingly, Fadiah has to be in a good body shape, namely slim and fit, in order to fulfil what she believes is her duty: satisfying her husband. As she states, a woman’s beauty cannot be revealed unless she is
slim. She kept emphasising the importance of a woman’s body in her relationship with the husband:

If the woman was overweight, the first problem she will encounter is her husband’s view of her. He will look at her as her body is not alluring to him. Every time he will say to her, “You should diet, reduce your weight, I don’t like your body”. I know many women who are suffering from their husbands’ pressure to lose weight. My advice to them is just to zip up their mouth, eat healthy, then they will not need any diet or gastric operation. If you have dignity you will not put yourself in a position that makes your husband be heavy-handed with you and break your heart. Because in Saudi society we have the notion of ‘I am a man, nothing would make me imperfect’. The man is the only person who can judge you because he is the only person who sees you naked. So, if you do not meet his sexual needs, he will definitely marry another woman.

Again, Fadiah demonstrates the daily life experiences of overweight women, and the bodies of such women negatively affect their marriages. The relationship between husband and wife is highly influenced by the wife’s body size. Fadiah links a woman’s ‘dignity’ with her body and appearance. She believes that a woman’s body size is part of her dignity that could be lost whenever she is overweight. Dieting, looking after one’s self, is part of maintaining self-esteem.

The interview with Fadiah’s daughter, Faten, revealed a shared disposition towards appreciating men’s satisfaction, although Faten was less direct and explicit than her mother in describing the husband and wife’s private life. A shared family habitus is reflected in their appreciation of the husband and how he is considered the centre of their lives. As Faten prioritises the husband, she allocates him as the first reason why women should look after their bodies and appearance:

There is a strong influence of a woman’s body on her social life. First of all, her husband, if the lady is slim, thin and sexy, her husband will not look at other ladies because he will be satisfied with his wife. He would say, “My wife is sexy and perfect and I don’t need to think about looking for another wife” … Honestly, I did not care about my body in the past, I mean during my undergraduate years. I had a few unsuccessful attempts to lose weight. My actual and successful experience losing weight was right before my wedding.

Faten is similar to her mother. She puts the husband as the first reason that a woman should look after her body, clarifying the importance of that. Satisfying the husband by having a slim body is an important element for Faten to reduce the threat of her husband marrying another woman. Faten shares with her mother the notion that a woman’s body plays a significant role in family stability. Admitting that she did not care
about her body until she got engaged emphasises their family habitus, which prioritises the husband and legitimises his power over his wife’s body. This is a similar priority as her mother, Fadiah, when she centralised the husband in her life. Faten’s point here is to explain how important it is for a woman to keep fit and slim to satisfy her husband. Faten believes that when the husband is pleased with his wife’s body, this will reduce the likelihood of him marrying another woman. Faten links a woman’s weight with being sexy and attractive for her husband within a secure marriage. Her notion replicates her mother’s belief in the importance of the wife being sexually attractive to her husband as the basis for a successful marriage.

As Saudi society is a masculine society, it entails women’s obedience to men’s orders and desires, and a woman’s body is a significant aspect of that. A woman’s body is her tool to have a durable family relationship and a successful marital life. In this case, I will specify men’s right to marry up to four wives, without legal or cultural condemnation. This leads to women feeling constantly insecure about themselves and under the threat of their husband taking another wife. Fadiah and Faten’s narrations reflect their insecurity about their bodies, which affects family stability. Coming from the same cultural background, I argue that their claim is correct. When the husband decides to marry another woman, the first wife could ask for a divorce, which is the only decision she can make. She cannot prevent him from remarrying but she can ask for a divorce, which will affect family stability.

As she believes that a slim body leads to a successful marriage, Fadiah shows concern for Faten’s body. In so doing, Fadiah is trying to ensure her daughter’s marriage stability. Fadiah has a direct way of guiding her daughter to look after her body by watching what she is eating. Faten describes her mother’s direct comments on her food:

> When my mom sees me eating rice and then pasta, she immediately says, “You’ve just had rice, enough, you’ve had too much carbs, and you know your husband wants you slim” … I know she’s saying that because she wants me to lose weight and be healthier.

As a family, it is apparent that the man is very crucial and significant in their daily lives. Because Fadiah is totally convinced of the importance of having a slim body and how it affects marital life, she has verbally articulated this belief to Faten in order to ensure that her daughter agrees. Thus, both Faten and her mother are concerned about the body and recognise the importance of it in their private and social lives. This shows how “women have striven to make their bodies conform to the local culture’s idea of what
constitutes sexual attractiveness” (Orbach, 2005: 52). However, they have different methods of achieving their aim. Fadiah is concerned about her body and she works towards having a fit body to please her husband by watching her diet. On the other hand, Faten is aware of the importance of maintaining a fit body, but she does not actively work on that.

Faten also believes that her appearance and sexual attractiveness to her husband play a role in family stability. If the husband is satisfied with his wife’s body, then they will live happily, as this will reduce the possibilities and reasons for the husband to look for another wife. In this way, the wife can keep her husband and family together. Conversely, when Faten has put on weight, she receives negative comments from the men in her family. As she stated, her brother and her husband always criticise her body:

My brother and my husband comment on my belly all the time. They always say, “Look at your sides’ muffin top, when are you going to lose weight, when are you going to lose this belly?” I’m fed up hearing these comments. Sometimes my husband’s comments are indirect. Last week I ordered a dessert from a restaurant, and then my husband said, “You don’t have to eat it, you are on a diet, aren’t you?” It was really heart-breaking. I asked him, “You always say your weight, your weight, what’s wrong with my body?” He replies, “I’m only concerned about your health”. I know he wants me to be thinner and to lose weight, though he said it indirectly. I get upset when someone criticises my body, I cry and stop eating until I starve. Then I eat wherever I come across and I’m back to the same point.

Negative comments by men about her body make Faten depressed, which affects her self-confidence. Again, Faten’s narration embodies symbolic power being practised through men’s negative comments. This concords with McKie et al.’s claim that:

Men exercise direct and indirect control over women’s dieting, directly by the demands they place upon women for particular types of foods that make dieting for women difficult, and indirectly by attitudes and judgements expressed about women’s figures and weight (1993: 36).

Not only do men’s comments affect Faten’s self-confidence and her eating habits, but also the comments made by others, including her mother and friends. All of the people surrounding her commenting on her body makes her feel that she is trapped in that body and needs to be released. This is an evidence of the presence of symbolic power in daily life experiences. Faten describes her husband’s comments as “heart-breaking”, showing how these comments affect the way she feels about herself and may cause depression. Faten’s case resonates with that of Sandra in Spitzack, who said:
Everyone tells you to diet. Thin is in. Be skinny. I get very upset, I wish I was thin. I try and begin to face [the fact] that I’m not going to be a skinny person. I want to go on a diet because I’ll be happier if I’m thinner (Spitzack, 1990: 65).

As Spitzack (1990) discussed Sandra’s case, there were other people pushing her to lose weight and she would diet only to avoid hearing negative comments about her body. Sandra links thinness with happiness as a taken-for-granted cultural demand. She is very similar to Faten, whose husband and brother comment on her body and food in order to make her diet and lose weight. These comments make her feel stigmatised and constrained because of her body. Faten tries to release herself from the weight of stigma. This is because the stigma of being overweight is more obvious within women than men (Prohaska and Gailey, 2009), especially in the Saudi context. Faten articulated encountering negative comments related to her body, whether direct, like her brother’s, or indirect, like her husband’s, who encourages her to follow an unhealthy diet to lose weight. This shows how other people’s comments make women feel discouraged and trapped.

Faten developed an eating disorder of starving herself and then bingeing, which could lead to health complications: “I cry and stop eating until I starve”. For women, food and body image have an overlapping relationship, as they use food as an instrument to achieve the desired body, whilst concern for health issues becomes a secondary priority (McKie et al., 1993). Faten deals with food as a tool that enables her to control her body, as “food refusal was first instigated as a way to cope with discomfort in her body” (Orbach, 2005: 129). It indicates that a health discourse underpins men’s influence over women’s bodies. Women would risk their health and thus their lives in favour of men’s satisfaction.

She starves herself as a technology to lose weight and avoid negative comments, which affect the way she feels about herself and also affect her relationship with her husband. Similar to her mother, Faten expressed her belief that a slim body correlates to a husband’s satisfaction and thus a stable marriage. According to that, a woman’s body is “experienced as an object that must be controlled or will control” (Orbach, 2005: 129). Looking at Fadiah and Faten’s experiences and statements, they believe that in order to stabilise and normalise their lives, they have to control their bodies. This could be viewed as an extension of men’s symbolic power and control over their bodies.

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Different reflections of the family habitus were evident among different families. Comparing Fadiah and Faten and other families, husbands and sexual life in linkage with a woman’s body are more present. Further, attending their female family gathering, the topic of sex and sexual life was present at the time it was absent in the other family gathering. In their gathering, they were wearing tight-fitted clothing though most of them are not slim. They indicate that wearing tight outfits makes them look slimmer and sexier. Despite that other participants expressed the importance of men’s satisfaction about their bodies, this issue was not as obvious and crucial as in Fadiah’s family. Fadiah’s family articulated the issue of men as critical and ‘fateful’ in terms of its effects on family stability. Other families express the importance of maintaining a fit body as a cultural norm. This family have a great disposition to centre their lives on their husbands and express the importance of body size to keep the family stable.

6.3 Summary

Mother-daughter dyads were a focus of attention in this chapter with the unique body family habitus for each family. Despite the distinctions in body size between mother and daughter, the chapter revealed how there is a common body habitus shared by mother and daughter. The mother-daughter dyads reflected habitus in the way they feel about themselves and thus the way in which they form their subjectivities. Families shared important dispositions and aspects relating to their bodies, such as body image disturbance or the ideal body they aim to have. This chapter revealed a strong link between women’s body weight, size, shape and their body satisfaction. This can be indicative of their family habitus and their disposition towards having a big body. Daughters have developed a dissatisfaction or dis/comfort condition similar to their mothers’ regardless of the difference in their body sizes, which can reveal aspects of their family habitus. Women link gaining weight and having visible flab with discomfort with their body.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Figure 15 Map of Chapter 7

- Introduction.
- Empirical achievements: the new beauty ideals.
- Theoretical contribution.
- Methodological contribution.
- Summary.
- Constraints of study and potentials for future studies.
7.1 Introduction

Throughout the past five years of producing this thesis, I have experienced a variety of thoughts, ideas, emotions and reflections regarding my research. My choice of topic was based on a personal interest in fitness, along with my academic background which consists of an undergraduate degree in Food and Nutrition studies and an MSc in Business Administration. Both subjects gave this project a fundamental base from which to start. In working alongside my participants, I enjoyed listening to their experiences and narrations about their lives, their bodies and controlling their weight and managing their bodies. I found reading the transcripts and thinking more deeply and reflecting on our conversation and my observations at the family gatherings enjoyable and a transformative personal experience to realise what richness of insights I had been capturing and the power of the techniques and research approach I had chosen to adopt. In addition, my own personal experiences with weight control made the whole research much more intense and I was able to better understand and interpret my participants’ narrations.

In this chapter I will review the achievements of this project by revisiting the research questions that I set out in the first chapter. My research questions were:

\[ RQ1: \] What are the socio-cultural factors that influence Saudi Arabian women’s weight management practices? And how do these factors affect their choice of these practices?

\[ RQ2: \] What are Saudi Arabian women’s experiences, motivations, expectations and understanding of weight management practices?

I will also demonstrate the empirical, theoretical and methodological contribution my study achieves. Lastly, I will discuss the limitations of my work and recommendations for further research.

7.2 Empirical Achievements: the new beauty ideal

This research aims to reveal some of the socio-cultural factors that underpin women’s management of their bodies and their weight. From the rich and detailed stories and experiences across two generations of women in 6 families, I found that these factors are interwoven (see Chapter 5) and in this way my empirical description shows an
intersectionality of cultural and social factors. In particular, the recent rapid change in beauty ideals among Saudi society was seen to have a profound and significant role in women’s contemporary subjectivities.

My research confirms the recent cultural change towards appreciating slimness is transformative in these women in how they define themselves as women. In the past, a fuller or larger female body was considered as desirable. Indeed, body size was not an important issue for Saudi society until ten or fifteen years ago. Rather, beauty was appreciated mainly in the facial features, as well as having natural-looking hair and skin tone. Due to cultural changes, all these beauty ideals have now shifted to the appreciation of slimness as a feminine beauty ideal, which is basically a Western ideal (Hesse-Biber, 1996). In other words, Saudi women now have adopted Western beauty ideals; one of which is ‘slimness’.

In addition, my participants referred to the media and globalisation as having the greatest impact in forming this change. My study resonates with other studies which investigated and described the relationship between body image and media in the Western context, for instance; Yamamiya et al. (2005), Grabe et al. (2008), Spurgas (2005), Featherstone (2010), Zukin and Maguire (2004) and Tiggemann and Kuring (2004). My findings extend these studies to include the Saudi Arabian context with conceptual addition of nuances of female-female gaze and mother-son gaze on the social body, and the importance of family habitus that were not identified or described in these earlier studies. My participants suggest that due to the Western idealisation image of a slim female body as presented in the media, Saudi women have started to compare themselves to the images they see. This comparison increased women’s body dissatisfaction and their ‘self-deprecation’. As a result, slimness has not only become the feminine beauty ideal that is pursued by women but it is also discussed among and demanded by men.

Many scholars suggest that the body in contemporary societies is a social body for example; Bordo (2003), Howson (2004), Turner (1995) and Crossley (2005). As the social body is constituted by social life and reflects its culture, my study explored the cultural changes in terms of beauty ideals and related factors through exploring women’s bodies. The social body as a ‘cultural text’ (Turner, 1992) that receives meanings and represents them renders individuals to be “like robots, controlled by forces beyond their reach” (Shilling, 2012: 53), which are social and cultural factors. In short, my participants confirmed they are embedded in and reinforce these cultural changes – slimness as a new body ideal– by adopting new practices. Through their narrations which indicated their
adopted bodily practices, my participants confirmed that their social positions are strongly linked with their bodies’ size and/or shape. Slim women are different to overweight women in terms of how they are treated in society and how they feel about themselves.

Marriage, an important social aspect in the Saudi society, was found to be another important factor influencing women’s engagement with weight management practices. The past ‘criteria’ for finding a wife have recently changed and now men prioritise slimness in their factors for choosing a wife. Furthermore, my participants affirmed the important role that a woman with a ‘well managed’ body has when trying to maintain a healthy and stable marital and family life. As long as sexual life is an important part of marital life, my participants confirmed the significance of maintaining a ‘slim and sexy’ body to fulfil their husbands’ needs. A link between slimness as a beauty ideal and marriage was strongly made by my participants. Mothers confirmed the importance of ‘slimness’ for their sons’ future wives. Unmarried participants described their bodies as an ‘obstacle’ to getting married and achieving the ‘ideal marital status’. Hence, their families – mothers, brothers, cousins – are persuading them to lose weight in order to increase their chances of getting married. Women who reach a certain age and do not get married are stigmatised by society.

Men’s comments on and judgement of women’s bodies were found as another factor that influenced women as to whether to participate in weight management practices or not. Married participants – particularly the younger women – confirmed that they felt the pressure to achieve and maintain fit bodies in order to satisfy their husbands, since they felt that by doing this they contributed to their families’ security and stability. It appears that husbands articulating their dissatisfaction with their wives’ bodies, and negatively commenting on their bodies and threatening them with a second marriage, is a usual phenomenon in Saudi society. My participants expressed their ‘fear and feeling of threat’ as their husbands considered getting another wife who could “please his sight” by having a slimmer body. In that sense, women are constantly under pressure that their body size could be a detrimental factor to affect the husband-wife relationship. Most of the married participants, especially daughters, expressed a negative body image and body dissatisfaction due to their husbands’ opinion of their bodies.

Interestingly, the mothers revealed another type of male gaze, the son’s gaze. My participants expressed their sons’ gaze, comments and judgement about their mothers’ bodies. Sons’ gaze functioned as a motivation for the mothers to manage their weight.
Sons criticise their mothers if they put on weight and encourage them if they lose weight. Further, mothers construed their sons as also commenting and criticising on their sisters’ bodies (the daughters’ of participant mothers). Daughters also confirmed their brothers’ negative comments about their bodies. Overall, when comparing mothers’ and daughters’ narrations, being concerned about slimness and actively managing their bodies through diets was found to be more persistent among the younger generation – for both men and women – than the older generation. My research extends the existing literature of male-female gaze to include son-mother gaze as a different type of male gaze that is not found in current literature, particularly in the Western context.

Family habitus and the mother-daughter relationship was found to be another factor that shaped women’s participation in weight management practices. Both mothers and daughters are framed by, reinforce and remake the shared family habitus. Relationships between mothers and daughters create motivating elements for the daughters to participate in weight management practices. Mothers influence their daughters’ perceptions of themselves either positively or negatively. Fear of getting fat, body anxiety, body shame and self-depreciation, which was reflected in their body dissatisfaction, were developed among daughters in reference to their mothers’ comments and opinions about daughters’ own bodies or food. And in some cases, daughters were taken deliberately by their mothers to dietitians to lose weight. Like Maor (2012; Maor and Cwikel, 2016) the role mothers play in developing their daughters’ negative body image is resonant in my study. Moreover, mothers and daughters learn their family habitus and naturalise it. Their everyday practices remake and reinforce the meaning and the practices of the mothers’ and daughters’ shared family habitus as the natural way of being, thinking and doing things.

Foucault (1977a) confirmed the dynamic of the power of surveillance over individuals within various social institutions. However, he did not specify his concept of surveillance among women only communities or the female to female gaze. In that sense, my research extends Foucault’s work on surveillance, to add the ‘women only community’ to other social institutions that that simplify the dynamic of power among individuals. Other women’s gaze or scrutiny was found to be another major factor that shaped women’s definition of themselves and their participation in weight management practices. All participants emphasised the presence and importance of the female gaze, the ‘surveillance’ among women, particularly in Saudi Arabia’s gender segregated
society, (see Chapter 1). Thus, my research revealed that gaze among women only is an important factor where power and surveillance are practiced within Saudi society.

The surveillance through female family gatherings is shown as a powerful mechanism through which this is performed and reinforced. Most of my participants showed tremendous concern for other women’s judgement about their appearance and also of other women in the family. Hence, the ‘women-only’ community has a significant impact on these women’s feelings about their body and identity, regardless of their body weight or size. Female family gatherings or other women-only occasions are the main type of socialising Saudi women can participate in. Participants showed their discomfort with certain body parts or their bodies overall under other women’s gazes, and they expressed their concern about ‘what other people would say’. Women appear to be constantly under pressure about others’ opinions – others being other women - and this particular of their appearance has had a major impact on how my participants evaluated themselves. This surveillance has developed contradictory feeling of either body shame, or pride.

Furthermore, this research aimed to investigate women’s weight management experiences and the practices they applied toward managing their bodies. I also aimed to reveal their understanding of these practices in the context they were applying them. Thus, I looked at the different practices they applied to their bodies in order to control them. Dieting was the main practice that all my participants have applied at least once in their life. They see it as the vital tool to lose weight. Self-organised diets, following as well as visits to a dietitian, joining a diet club, fasting, and appetite suppressing pills were reported as technologies that women used to control their weight. Participants referred to diets as a temporary solution or treatment for ‘fat’ rather than seeing them as a healthy lifestyle. Some participants were psychologically comfortable when they dieted though they did not lose weight. Women also dieted in order to attend important occasions, such as weddings. They followed very low calorie diets for a couple of weeks before the occasion in order to appear with a better body. Moreover, women who encountered more direct verbal comments by their husbands reported more unhealthy diets.

On the other hand, food was seen by these women as the ‘enemy’. When they expressed feeling good about dieting, they felt ‘bad, down, guilty’ when they broke their diet. In some occasions, food worked as a social exclusion factor. In their family gatherings, some participants would ‘break’ their diet because they did not want to feel isolated from the rest of the group. This is because sharing food is one of the most
important social norms in Saudi society (Long, 2005). In that sense, culture and social norms place women under many ‘contrasting demands’. Attending weekly female family gatherings, and sharing food and drink were ‘unsaid’ cultural norms and obligations. It was seen as socialising, and rejecting such invitations was unacceptable. At the same time, society ‘demanded’ women to be fit and slim.

These two opposite aspects played a role in the way that the women in my study managed their bodies and thus the way they felt about themselves. My participants expressed the ‘struggle’ trying to balance between their social obligations and achieving slim bodies. Unmarried participants revealed an aspect of being judged and stigmatised for being “obese and unmarried”. These contrasting feelings exacerbate the pressure these women feel about their capacity to manage their bodies.

Exercise was another technology women applied to control their bodies. Despite the fact that this practice was less popular among my participants, it was important for them. When women exercised, they felt good about themselves as it improved their bodies’ shapes. Unlike women’s use of dieting as a temporary solution to lose weight, women who exercised felt that their body was the ‘project’ of their lives and exercising is part of this project. Even though they aimed to control their bodies, exercise is considered as part of their daily life routine rather than a temporary solution to lose weight. As they said, exercise is a daily technology that improves their feelings about themselves and their bodies.

The use of clothing and fashion was another technology that women applied to control their bodies. Chapter 5 discussed how women used their clothing as a technique to show or hide their bodies from other women’s ‘gaze’. They tended to wear loose clothes to hide unpleasant areas of their bodies, while tight-fitted clothing was worn by fit women to ‘show-off’ their bodies. Some participants expressed that they are dreaming of wearing a “crop top, low waist jeans and G-string underwear”. However, because of social constraints as their bodies do not meet beauty ideals, this type of clothing would be a source of negative judgement and comments. I found that their choice of clothing depended on their subjectivity and the way they felt about their bodies. Some participants were considered to have normal weight according to their BMI, though they were trying to hide certain parts of their bodies that they felt anxious about. On the other hand, other women were overweight but they were feeling more comfortable with their bodies thus their choice of clothing was to make it visible. Overall, women’s bodies are more than
personal belongings, they are entities that allocate them in different social levels and thus construct their subjectivities.

My exploration of the socio-cultural factors that influence women to follow these technologies were revealed, and my findings suggest that Saudi women control and manage their body weight in several ways and for many reasons. Dieting and exercise were the major technologies applied to control their body weight. Another technology that appeared in their narration was the surgical option. Participants highlighted the wide application of this option too, though it was not in the scope of this research. Self-organised diets, following up with a dietitian, and joining a diet centre or gym were found to be the substantial practices used to control body weight among my participants. Overall, the women’s community within this conservative society has increased the pressure on women to fulfil the ideals of the culture. Accordingly, they alter their behaviour and manage their weight aiming to appear at their best according to the society’s expectations.

7.3 Theoretical contribution

This thesis draws upon key concepts by two major theorists, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, allowing me to get deep insight into women’s consumption of weight management products and services through these theorists’ lenses. Foucault’s work (1977; 1980; 1982; 1986; 1988) and Bourdieu’s (1977; 1989; 1991; 2001) theory of power and power relations enables a view of how power is practised over women and contributes to mould their subjectivities. Both suggest that ‘the body’ is a social entity that obeys social rules and becomes a metaphor for the culture in which they live, as has been identified by other authors (Featherstone, 2010; Turner, 1991; Frank, 2001) but not in a Saudi or Muslim context. Adopting these two thinkers’ theories has helped in answering my research questions. Foucault’s notion of power suggests that all human social relations are power relations that have mutual influence on each other. Power constructs women’s definition of subjectivity through various forms of power.

Exploring women’s subjectivity through Foucault’s lens of power and Bourdieu’s perspective of symbolic power demonstrates how women encounter power in their everyday life and how they turn it into productive power in order to control their bodies. Notably, I mobilized Foucault’s power relations and Bourdieu’s symbolic power side by side in their treatment of power, thus I applied these concepts as synonyms. Despite the
different lenses of how Foucault and Bourdieu approached power, there is similarity in the impact of power over individuals’ behaviour. Therefore, individuals’ practices are governed by disciplinary power and symbolic power which is practised by the society. Surveillance and self-surveillance are the applied tools of disciplinary power over individuals. In that sense, individuals apply disciplinary practices and technologies of the self as a productive practice of power. Disciplinary practice is an application of disciplinary power where individuals discipline their bodies as a response to power. These practices become technologies of the self as women expressed improving their sensations about themselves and ‘feeling good’.

Moreover, Bourdieu (1977, 2001) suggests that within societies, individuals encounter symbolic power – which is a form of power relations – as a subordinate power. Individuals take social rules as facts or truth and accept all judgements based on that truth. Bourdieu also claims that individuals develop their dispositions towards behaving in a certain manner based on their habitus. This habitus is formed by their social interactions and the accumulation of experiences throughout life. He emphasises the family as an important factor of shaping individuals’ behaviour.

Drawing on these theories within the Saudi Arabian context proves the applicability of these theories in a different social-cultural context which further demonstrates the useful insights these theories bring in different cultural contexts. Looking at how power operates among women can explain how socio-cultural factors shape the way women define themselves and thus make sense of their weight control practices. Symbolic power practised by men over women demonstrates men’s domination over women’s bodies, particularly in this heavily patriarchal, religious and conservative society. Furthermore, it shows how the power of surveillance among women can control the way women feel about themselves and how they manage their bodies in specific ways such as trying to control their weight. Dieting, exercise and clothing were adopted as technologies that women apply to control their sensation about themselves. Despite the fact that some participants did not report any physical change due to diet or exercise, they still felt good about themselves. Application of these disciplinary practices such as diet and exercise is evidence that women’s bodies are understood as docile and malleable and can be managed, formed and reformed.

Family habitus indications were shown in the data. Studying mother and daughter dyads, in addition to attending their family gatherings, gave a rich insight into family habitus. Bourdieu (1996) looked at the family as an important social institution that
moulds its members’ identities and behaviour. Therefore, family members have a common sense of the world and a similar way of classifying and perceiving the world that can be seen in their dispositions (Bourdieu, 1996). My research found the dynamic in mother and daughter relationships and how their family habitus influences their bodily practices within the Saudi Arabian context. Like Maor and Cwikel (2016) my research therefore demonstrates within a Saudi Arabian cultural context how long-lasting mother daughter relationships contribute toward forming daughters’ on-going dispositions and practices. In that sense, different families have different family habitus where it was seen in their dispositions to; body image disturbance, fear of fat, physically active bodies, criticizing fat bodies and prioritizing husbands and sexual life. My research has extended Bourdieu’s work on habitus to be applied in the Saudi Arabian context, particularly to illustrate the dynamics in mother-daughter relationships and their relation to bodily practices.

Applying Foucault’s theory of power and Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power helped analysing women’s weight management practices within discourse. Similarly, Bourdieu’s notion of family habitus helped me to understand the integration of the multiple factors which shape women’s bodily practices and behaviour in their daily lives. Linking this idea with Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power as productive, I can find compatibility between them both. Moreover, Foucault’s and Bourdieu’s work discusses the body as being a social body. Their theories offered a clear understanding of the factors that shape the social body and influence bodily behaviour. These theories helped in comprehending the participants’ logic and motivations concerning their weight management practices. My research contributed to knowledge by bridging these two theories to reveal women’s bodily behaviour and weight management practices within the Saudi Arabian context.

7.4 Methodological contribution

In terms of the methodological contributions, this thesis is based on the investigation of women’s weight management practices and the socio-cultural factors influencing these practices. Approaching participants through a collective set of methods facilitated the gathering and processing of different types of data sources. Hence, I was able to get a deeper insight into the field. Designing a comprehensive interview guide, and the use of stimuli materials gave the participants a wide space to express themselves.
and their experiences without being constrained to a limited list of questions. In addition, observing women in their weekly family gatherings allowed me to notice their behaviour and interactions in a natural occurring occasion that was not obvious in other methods. Moreover, reading their diaries revealed more sensitive and delicate issues about their subjectivities. Move between different types of data enabled me to expose myself to various thoughts, feelings experiences and practices. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 I presented different data that contributed toward answering the research questions and offered an empirical and conceptual analysis of these women’s subjectivities. For example, my participants’ diaries offered valuable data in terms of how these women experienced dieting on certain days. Participants’ observations allowed me to enter these women’s worlds and enabled me to identify unspoken nuances about families. I was able to capture data around issues like surveillance and women’s dress, body language, interaction and behaviour within these women’s communities.

To summarise, the methodological approach I have taken demonstrates how the methodological limitations of previous women’s health and weight studies might be overcome in order to develop more nuanced qualitative accounts of women’s subjectivities within the context of the socio-cultural factors affecting them and the resulting application of their weight management practices. Previous more quantitative studies that investigated Saudi women’s obesity and body image did not give attention to women’s subjectivities and the socio-cultural factors affecting them. Moreover, being an ‘insider’ researcher within this conservative society has given me a valuable and comprehensive perspective on women’s weight management experiences.

7.5 Constraints of this study and the potential for future studies

This research has drawn on the concept of power through the perspectives of Foucault and Bourdieu. In that sense, the related concepts, such as surveillance and technologies of the body, were discussed. The research has demonstrated how power is practised on women’s bodies within the society. However, it did not take into account the concept of ‘resistance to power’ which is another concept related to power. As Foucault theorises power relations, he suggests that “Where there is power, there is resistance” (1990: 95). He claims that there is a possibility for individuals to resist as a way to confront power relations in order to achieve their freedom (Foucault, 1990). This aspect of power resistance can be explored in future studies to understand women’s participation
in weight management practices. For future research, resistance from a Foucauldian perspective could be further discussed.

In addition, this study has explored Saudi women who are engaged with weight management practices. Investigating women from the city of Jeddah only means overlooking women from other parts of the country. Different regions of the country have different social norms, customs and habits (Long, 2005), and it might be that these bring family habitus that are different from those described here. Nevertheless, the pursuit to describe and record the unique family habitus that there may be would serve to extend this study into an intersectional understanding of women’s subjectivities, bodies and body related practices. Therefore, future studies are recommended to consider studying women’s weight management practices in different areas of Saudi Arabia. Although class identification was not targeted for this research, analysing data showed that participants belonged to the middle class or the upper-middle class. For future studies, investigating different social classes would reveal more factors that influence women’s weight management practices. Furthermore, this research found that there is a growing number of women who turn to gastric surgeries to reduce their weight. Expanding the research by recruiting women who have undergone gastric surgeries is recommended for future studies.

Time was a constraining influence on this study to some extent. Three months of data collection were not adequate to interview women before and after losing weight. Having a much longer period to notice and study women’s definition of their subjectivities and the changes before and after losing weight is an extension to this study that would be worth pursuing. I believe that interviewing women twice, within a gap of six to eight months, will illustrate more details about women’s subjectivities. Moreover, being a female researcher, I only managed to interview female subjects. For future research, interviewing men would offer new perspectives about the additional factors influencing women’s body management issues from a different perspective, the men’s view, especially because this research has proven the great impact of men-women relationships on the issues involved in weight control practices.
Appendices
To: KHULOD ALQUTUB

Subject: Ethical Application Ref. ka232-02f6

(Please quote this ref on all correspondence)

31/07/2013 13:44:53

School of Management

Project Title: Weight management practices among Saudi women

Thank you for submitting your application which has been considered.

This study has been given ethical approval, subject to any conditions quoted in the attached notes.

Any significant departure from the programme of research as outlined in the application for research ethics approval (such as changes in methodological approach, large delays in commencement of research, additional forms of data collection or major expansions in sample size) must be reported to your Departmental Research Ethics Officer.

Approval is given on the understanding that the University Research Ethics Code of Practice and other research ethics guidelines and protocols will be complied with

- [http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/code-of-practice](http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/code-of-practice)
- [http://www.le.ac.uk/safety/](http://www.le.ac.uk/safety/)
The following is a record of correspondence notes from your application ka232-02/16. Please ensure that any proviso notes have been adhered to:

Jul 31 2013  7:41AM  PHD research ethics application sent to James Fitchett for authorisation

Jul 31 2013  1:42PM  I am happy to approve this application.

--- END OF NOTES ---
Access Letters

Letter to Diet Centre

Dear manager of the Saudi Chinese Centre (Diet Centre)

Dr. Riyad Al-Hejin,

My name is Khulod Alqutub. I am a PhD student, carrying out a research on “Weight management practices among Saudi women” at the University of Leicester in the UK. As part of my research, I am looking at the socio-cultural factors that influence Saudi Arabian women’s weight management practices, and how these factors affect their choice of these practices. As part of my PhD research project, I was wondering if I could have access to your establishment in order to invite a number of members to participate in my project and be interviewed by myself. These members have to be women who are visiting the dietitians in the Saudi Chinese Centre as a way of controlling and managing their weight. The participation will be voluntary and, of course, they have the right to accept or reject the invitation. This will enable me to conduct an in-depth analysis and will provide me with a deeper insight into weight management practices that Saudi women engage with. I intend to conduct the interviews between 16/7/2014 and 16/10/2014. All information provided is guaranteed to be confidential and anonymous and will not be shared by third party.

I would be very grateful if you could allow me permission to access and invite some women members to participate in my project. If you have any query please do not hesitate to contact me for further information. My contact details are stated below.

Yours sincerely,

Khulod Alqutub
Research Student
School of Management
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester, LE1 7RH
Email: ka232@le.ac.uk
Tel.: 00966554606424
Letter to the gym

Dear manager of the gym

My name is Khulod Alqutub. I am a PhD student, carrying out a research on “Weight management practices among Saudi women” at the University of Leicester in the UK. As part of my research, I am looking at the socio-cultural factors that influence Saudi Arabian women’s weight management practices, and how these factors affect their choice of these practices. As part of my PhD research project, I was wondering if I could have access to your gym in order to invite a number of members to participate in my project and be interviewed by myself. The participation will be voluntary and, of course, they have the right to accept or reject the invitation. This will enable me to conduct an in-depth analysis and will provide me with a deeper insight into weight management practices that Saudi women engage with. I intend to conduct the interviews between 16/7/2014 and 16/10/2014. All information provided is guaranteed to be confidential and anonymous and will not be shared by third party.

I would be very grateful if you could allow me permission to access and invite some women members to participate in my project. If you have any query please do not hesitate to contact me for further information. My contact details are stated below.

Yours sincerely

Khulod Alqutub
Research Student
School of Management
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester, LE1 7RH
Email: ka232@le.ac.uk
Tel.: 00966554606424
Diet Centre response letter

Saudi Chinese Center

Dr. Riyad Al-Hejin

Date: 13/3/2014

English translation:

In reference to your request

You have submitted a request (through the mailbox) through the Department of Dietetics at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom - which is not a fact that the dietitian in the Saudi Chinese Center in Jeddah - the first to deal with such cases in the project. And this is also an observation in collaboration with the Arabic studies and the diet program for the private sector, which is a part of the work of the diet program, and which is supervised by Dr. Riad Al-Hejin.

We have agreed to carry out the tests during the period from 15/11/2014 to 15/11/2015.

And on this basis, we promise that we will conduct the tests during the period mentioned above. As we are using the information and the data sent to us from the management of our project. If we need to add any comments to the final report.

Without affecting the work of the Saudi Chinese Center.

Signed:

Dr. Riyadh Al-Hejin
Invitation poster to participate in the research
Arabic poster (the original)
Are you reducing your weight?

This is an invitation to participate in a doctoral research study for a student at the University of Leicester. The research aims to explore the social and cultural factors that motivate Saudi women to participate in weight management practices and why have you chosen them? The research aims to understand your daily experiences in reducing your weight and what are the factors and effects that you face daily during this experience.

This research will include individual interviews with participants in relation to weight loss experiences and everyday issues around it.

If you would like to participate, please call me on 0554606424 for further details.
Participants consent letter

I am Khulod Alqutub, a PhD student at the University of Leicester, School of Management. I am currently carrying out a research on “Weight Management Practices among Saudi women”. The purpose of conducting this research is to understand women’s experiences, thoughts and feelings about weigh management practices through engaging with diet clubs and gyms.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research interview. The interview will take place at your home and at your preferable time. We will discuss your experiences of dieting and managing your weight. During this interview, we will discuss your different experiences of dieting, controlling your weight and how you feel about that. The interview will last approximately 1 or 2 hours. You will also be asked to keep a reflective diary about your daily experiences, emotions and thoughts, regarding weight management practices, for a 2-week period. Detailed guidance and help will be given and I will be available to talk to you if you have any problems or concerns when completing your diary.

The information you will provide in the interview and the diary will not be shared with the institution that you are members of and will be confidential and kept secured. It will be used for my PhD research and only for academic purposes and publication. I may include some of your anonymous verbatim quotes in a published article or my open access thesis, but your name and details will be changed.

Consent Statement

1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the research at any time, without giving any reason.
2. I am aware of what my participation will involve.
3. I understand that my participation is anonymous.
4. I understand that the confidentiality of my participation is guaranteed.
5. All questions that I have about the research have been satisfactorily answered.

I agree to participate.

Participant’s signature: _________________________________

Participant’s name (please print): _________________________________

Date: __________
Interviews questions

1) Biographical questions to open the interview:
   What is your name, age, marriage status, occupation, number of children?

2) As a woman in Saudi society, are you concerned about your body weight, shape?

3) Tell me, what is it like in SA for a woman in your age?

4) Can you tell me about your diet?

5) Do you do any formal exercise?

6) Did you try any diet in the past?

7) Then, what do think makes you dieting or exercising?

8) Have you ever thought about joining a diet club/gym?

9) Do you prefer one over the other?

10) Do you use a specific diet centre/gym to control your weight?

11) If so, which one do you think suits you the most?

12) Tell me your experiences about dieting throughout your life. When was the first time you began a diet?

13) Do you remember any incidents during your childhood that might have led you to diet today?

14) When you start a diet, do you prefer to talk about it with someone? Why?

15) Does the dress shopping experience has effected your decision on dieting? How?

16) What about TV and ads, magazines, dress shops in shopping malls – do they make any deference on your decision?

17) Have ads changed since you were a child? How?

18) Tell me about your childhood memories about food, what were the usual food practices?

19) Is your body weight or shape important in your social life?

20) What is the role of your family in your dieting/exercise?

21) If so, how does your family affect your opinion on your body?

22) Have you ever been told that you have to lose weight? Mother/father/husband/brother?

23) Is there a specific pressure from your husband, mother, father or friends to make you want to lose weight?

24) Do have health complications history in your family that makes you concerned about your health in relation to your weight?

25) How often do you have your female family gatherings?


27) Do you usually talk about or mention weight management ways, like dieting or exercise that you or your family talk about. What do you feel?

28) Is your body something that is talked about in your family? Who? Jokes or comments?

29) How do feel if someone asks you about your current weight?

30) What does consuming diet products means to you? Why?
31) In your opinion, what is the difference between following a diet and exercising?
32) How do see yourself in ten years from now?
33) How do see your daughter in ten years from now?
34) Does your body weight increase or decrease your chance of getting married?
35) Are you concerned about your daughter’s weight in the matters of marriage?
36) How do you deal with that?
37) LAST: do you mind if I ask you about your weight and height?

2. Look at these pictures:
- What do you think of these centres? Are you member of any of them?
- Are you considering joining any of them in the future? Why?
- Have these places changed or increased since you were a child? If yes, what do you think is the benefit of these place for women?
Diary form given to the participants

In Arabic (the original)
هذه بعض الأسئلة التي يمكن أن تستمتع في كتابة المذكرات خاصة بأنها غير حصرية ولك جريمة الاختيار في ما سوف تكتبين فيها ينطلق بوجود الحميمة الرياضية، وركعت ومشترك

1. إذا حصل اليوم كيف تشعرين نداء جسدك؟ ما هي الأفكار التي دارت في ناج اليوم؟

2. هل حصل أي شيء مخاطف اليوم جعلك تكترين نداء جسدك بطريقة معينة أو بطريقة مختلفة عن بحالي الأيدي?

3. كيف مضى اليوم مع الحميمة الرياضية؟

4. هل سمعتي أي مند أو أند دوحة بسبب جسمل؟

5. إذا زرتى أخصائتك اليوم، كيف كان منحى معه؟
First, I would like to thank you for participating in my research. I want to understand your perceptions, ideas and beliefs about different methods you apply to control your weight. I also want to know your thoughts and feelings that made you follow a diet or think about losing weight. Here you can write a daily report of your feelings and experiences about your body. Every day, we go through different emotions about ourselves and our bodies, depending on our moods and sensations. The experiences with diet or exercise vary from day to day, depending on the individual’s mood and surrounding factors.

In these diaries, you can write down everything you think about weight, body, diet, sport, appearance. Do not worry about what you will write, just write whatever you feel like. The smallest details and nuances are very important for the success of this research.

Please read the following steps that might help you write your diaries:

- Remember, these diaries belong to you and they are very important to the research, so please write down as much detail as possible in terms of your feelings, experiences, activities, diet and sport.

- Write down everything you feel about your body, for example: I ate a piece of chocolate and I follow my diet, I feel guilty about it.

- Do not care to write in classical Arabic, write in any language you like, whether colloquial or standard.

- Please use a pen and, if possible, write clearly so I can read it.

- Write the diary twice a week for a month and remember to note the date and day for each entry.

- On the next page there is a set of questions that might help you write the entry.

- If you encounter any difficulties, please give me a call 0554606424
Here are some questions that could help you writing notes. They are not exclusive, they are just examples, and you are absolutely free to choose what you would like to write about the subject of diet - exercise - your weight and appearance.

1) What happened today? How do you feel about your body? What are the ideas that occurred in your mind today?
2) Has anything different happened today that made you think about your body in a certain way, or in a different way from the other days?
3) How was your day regarding the diet or exercise?
4) Have you heard any compliment or criticism about your body?
5) If you have visited a nutritionist today, how was your appointment with her?
Samples from participants’ diaries
Sample from Hela’s [MF5] diary
Sample from Beasan’s [DF5] diary
Sample from Fayza’s [DF4] diary
لا يمكنني قراءة النص العربي من الصورة.
Sample from Nora’s [DF3] diary
لا يوجد نص يمكن قراءته من الصورة المقدمة.
Sample from Rawda’s [MF1] diary

دائمًا ما التعبير يتأثر بالشعر، فالشعر يترجم الأفكار في أسلوب ودقة، بدأنا استمر في القراءة، وانصرفت يتنفس، ما نسأري، ارتجام العيب، ودربًا نحن، أوصى على الكمال، وسأقرأ على النادي، مع سامح، دليل الخطيرة، ب风险管理.
Sample from Hanan’s [DF2] diary
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