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**Title:** Young people’s experiences of fashion modelling: An exploratory phenomenological study

**Abstract:**

Research about fashion modelling within Psychology remains sparse. Rare empirical studies which do exist exhibit a tendency to pathologise models, and provide only a superficial insight into this career. Little is known about who a fashion model really is, what a young person who models experiences in their careers, or how they make sense of this role. With this in mind, the current study sought to explore the lived experience of young people who are fashion models. Three participants offered experiential accounts of modelling in the fashion industry, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed superordinate themes: ‘Growth and Development’, ‘Changes in Self-Perception’, and ‘A Job? Or a Way of Life?’. Change was found to be an integral part of the participants’ experiences, which led to both positive and negative developmental outcomes, including a self-reported growth in confidence and maturity, yet a potentially more self-critical view of one’s appearance. The role seemed to be an all-encompassing lifestyle rather than a job, and it is argued that modelling at a young age may act as a catalyst for a transition into adulthood. This study is exploratory in nature but provides an initial insight into the experiences of fashion modelling. The discussion identifies ways in which cognate sub-disciplines of Psychology may contribute to this area of research, thus developing and extending further the Psychological literature base in the field of fashion studies.

**Key Words:** Fashion models, young people, experience, modelling, interpretative phenomenological analysis
**Introduction**

When considering representations of fashion models in the media, there appear to be two contrasting images. One is glamorized, associated with a lavish lifestyle, exceptional beauty and desirability; the opposing highlights drug abuse, sexual harassment from photographers and industry professionals, and the portrayal of a less desirable lifestyle (e.g. Mears 2011). However, what it actually means to be a fashion model remains unclear.

Masuch and Hefferon (2014) note that the area of fashion has been largely neglected within contemporary Psychology. Though this may be true of fashion studies in general, what Psychology has not neglected is how fashion has been consumed, and the effect professionals within fashion may have on their audience. For example, much research has been conducted on the psychological and psychosocial effects suffered by young women who are exposed to images of fashion models in the media from sources such as fashion magazines (e.g. Choi et al. 2008; Thomsen 2002; Milkie 1999; Pinhas et al. 1999; Stice et al. 1994; Martin and Kennedy 1993; Myers and Biocca 1992; Richins 1991). Field et al. (1999) found that sixty-nine percent of over five-hundred adolescent girls suggested that their beauty ideal was based on magazine images, and that forty-seven percent of these young women sought to lose weight as a result of this comparison. Other studies suggest a correlation between the frequency of viewing fashion magazines and increased body dissatisfaction (e.g. Ahern et al. 2011; Nasser 2009; Dittmar 2005; Clay et al. 2005; Halliwell et al. 2005; Halliwell and Dittmar 2004; Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2003; Harrison and Cantor 1997; Stice et al. 1994). Ogden and Russell (2013) contend that this occurs because fashion models signify the ‘societal ideal’ (p. 1589), thus are often used as comparison figures.

One might draw from this literature that the fashion industry, and specifically the models which represent it, have the potential to be harmful to their audience. However, little psychological research has considered the perspectives of any fashion models themselves. One of the few to do so are Meyer et al. (2007) whose study was based around the idea that whilst literature exists illustrating that attractive people are better psychologically adjusted and typically viewed as more occupationally competent, models are also shown to have problems with addiction and personality disturbances. Their research measured levels of
psychological adjustment amongst professional fashion models as compared to non-models, providing empirical evidence to either support or dispute the idea that models may be less well adjusted. Findings indicated that models demonstrated slightly lower need satisfaction and wellbeing, but greater personality maladjustment when compared to non-models. The authors speculated that this was the case as fashion models are expected only to look good, and ‘are not valued for their ability to perform difficult, skilled tasks’ (p. 14). They also proposed that models have to regularly subordinate their wishes to the mandates of their clients and employers, which would interfere with the satisfaction of their needs for autonomy.

Meyer et al.’s (2007) study highlights some concerning issues in relation to the wellbeing of models. For example, they suggest that it may not be the context of modelling which causes a model to experience lower levels of psychological wellbeing, but rather that individuals who have slightly more narcissistic, intensely emotional, non-conforming, and socially alienated personalities might seek a career in modelling. It seems that further research is required to explore potential personality traits which may be typical of those who are attracted to the industry. However, it is interesting to note that at the end of their article the authors acknowledge some qualitative data gathered which suggested that the occupational context of modelling may not be a conducive environment to meet relatedness needs. If this is so, it could be that some of the measures were not appropriate for the profession, rather than the models’ low scores being due to something within themselves. Clearly these findings merit further research and replication in order to establish their robustness. A further limitation of Meyer et al.’s (2007) work is that conclusions appear to be drawn about the role of a fashion model based on assumption about the occupation. No research is cited about the ‘skills’ required to model or the duties of a fashion model, (possibly because it does not exist); however, further research is still required to identify what is involved in the profession of fashion modelling.

The existing body of evidence around fashion modelling, still in its infancy, seems to neglect the individuals in the role. In all the examples cited above, there is little indication of who a fashion model really is. Some detail about fashion models can be found embedded in the media, in short interviews, documentaries, and fashion blogs across the internet. These tend to outline their career successes, such as which designers they have worked for and how
many magazines they have appeared on the cover (e.g. Models.com: The Faces of Fashion). It appears that both psychological research and the media offer only a superficial level of insight into fashion models themselves, and little has been published to capture the human behind the label (though it must be acknowledged that sociological texts such as Wissinger, 2015; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2012; and Mears, 2011 do offer some insight of this nature).

Phenomenological research can make a contribution here. Whilst large samples can inform us about general trends within populations, it must also be acknowledged that Psychology is about understanding individuals, therefore research at an idiographic level is also important. Similar to Masuch and Hefferon’s (2014) contention that mainstream Psychology has neglected fashion, the discipline has previously been accused of neglecting human experience (Stevens 1996). Based on the fact that Psychology is the study of human behaviour, this seems counterintuitive, and authors such as Smith (1996, 2011a) and Smith et al. (2009) have highlighted the important contribution that experiential research can make. Jonathon Smith has arguably made the biggest contribution to this shift, to include the study of ‘experience’ within UK Psychology, by introducing in the mid-nineties a phenomenological approach for qualitative research, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In his 2004 paper on the development of IPA within Psychology, Smith defines its theoretical position as aiming ‘to explore in detail participants’ personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that experience’ (Smith 2004: 40).

This approach focuses at an idiographic level of exploration, involving detailed analyses aimed at unravelling the intricacies of personal accounts. In order to accommodate this level of analysis, sample sizes tend to be small in IPA. It is also acknowledged that the analysis is an interpretative process, therefore a further theoretical influence is hermeneutics. When conducting IPA, Smith notes that the analysis of someone else’s experience is by nature a two-pronged process, where one level of interpretation takes place with the participant making sense of their situation, and the second the researcher interpreting this account. Smith has coined the phrase ‘double hermeneutic’ to account for this. Finally, as the name suggests, the approach is rooted within phenomenology, which is the philosophical movement which focuses on lived experience. Taken together, idiography, hermeneutics and phenomenology converge to provide the framework for IPA (e.g. Smith et al. 2009).
In relation to fashion models, there seems a dearth of literature capturing this level of analysis. Therefore a phenomenological, exploratory study, such as the one presented here, is an important and necessary starting point to developing a corpus of research seeking to understand the world of modelling from a model’s perspective. The focus of the present study was the lived experience of being a fashion model. Specific emphasis was placed on the following research questions: ‘What do those who work as models in the fashion industry experience during their modelling careers?’ and ‘How do they make sense of this role?’ As ninety-two percent of working fashion models began modelling between the ages of thirteen and twenty (The Model Alliance 2014), we were particularly interested in the accounts of young people who were modelling. Thus, the overall aim was ‘To explore the lived experience of young people who are fashion models’.

Method

Methodological overview

For the reasons outlined above, IPA was considered the appropriate qualitative approach for this study. What follows are the more specific details relating to the design, participants and analytic process.

Design

A qualitative approach was deemed necessary for this study, as the research questions required detailed experiential accounts. The focus was on how participants made sense of being fashion models, and the currency for this analysis was language. The authors were not seeking to measure the effect of this career on specific variables, therefore, a quantitative approach was rendered inappropriate.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used for data collection. Semi-structured interviews have a flexible nature, allowing the participant to discuss their personal experiences without the constraints of specific questions (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggest that such an approach encourages the production of deep, detailed data, which was important for the present study.
The schedule was designed based around the guidelines offered by Smith and Osborn (2015), which suggest dividing the questions into different sections. For the present study, they were categorized into five sections: ‘Background’, ‘Your Job’, ‘Challenges / Rewards’, ‘Self-Perception / Self-Identity’, ‘Final Reflections’, thus covering a range of modelling experiences, both physical and emotional.

The layout of the schedule was carefully considered, with the inclusion of some introductory questions at the beginning of each interview, and more involved questions during the middle-section of the schedule; allowing the participant to ease into discussing their experiences, and enabling the researcher-participant relationship to develop past any initial stages of discomfort / unfamiliarity (Eide and Kahn 2008). All questions were open-ended, ensuring the interview was not solely researcher led, but rather allowed the participant to elaborate on whatever aspect they felt most relevant to the research question (Gillham 2005; Krueger and Casey 2009). Questions were worded broadly enough that participants could discuss their most prominent experiences in each area, yet specifically enough to offer the participant some guidance.

Participants
The inclusion criteria comprised of any individual, male or female, who had experience of working as a model in the fashion industry (including both current and retired models). The definition of a fashion model adhered to was: ‘a person employed to display clothes by wearing them’ (ODE 2010). An age range of eighteen to twenty-five years old was used. This age bracket was set for two reasons. The first was to include a sample over the age of eighteen for ethical purposes relating to being able to give independent, informed consent. The second was to include an age range which related to ‘young people’ (up to the age of 25) as defined by UK policy (e.g. GOV.UK 2013). Only fashion models who had been working for at least three months were included, to ensure each participant had some experience of the career.

Ethical approval was gained from the university ethics committee where the authors are based, before a purposive sampling technique was used to recruit potential participants. Participants were recruited through personal contacts of the first author, who used to work in the modelling industry, and were reached via social networking. A snowball sampling
technique was used during recruitment (Biggerstaff 2012). The first author contacted some fashion models he had previously worked with via text message and social networking websites; they in turn contacted their own colleagues, until three individuals agreed to participate.

The final sample included three participants with a range of modelling experiences. This size of sample resonates with IPA’s commitment to detailed idiographic accounts. Participants comprised two females and one male: Lara, who had five months of modelling experience, George, a fashion model with three years’ experience, and Anna, a retired model who had two years’ experience. To protect anonymity, all participants were assigned pseudonyms throughout this research, and in relation to the inclusion criteria, only the age requirements (18-25 years) and duration of modelling career (at least three months) were checked. Their place of origin was also noted, and where they had modelled. One participant had modelled in the United States of America, one in the United Kingdom, and the other had been based both in the States and UK.

Procedure

Having gained ethical approval, a pilot study was conducted with a personal friend of the first author, who was a fashion model. The purpose of the pilot study was to check the clarity of the questions and ascertain that they prompted experiential data. As a result of this, a few questions were modified, and some removed as they evoked similar responses and could have been considered to be a little repetitive. Data collection commenced soon after.

All participants were sent an information sheet about the study prior to interview, and were advised they may withdraw from the study before a specified date without providing any reason (set to six weeks after the date of each interview). Participants were also informed that they had the option of requesting a copy of the interview transcript and audio recording. A semi-structured interview schedule was created for the purpose of this study (outlined in the design section), in addition to a study information sheet, a consent form, and a debrief sheet. No incentive other than research collaboration was offered, to ensure that each participant was sharing their experiences out of personal preference, rather than
extrinsic motivation (Head 2009). A recording device was used for each interview, and all audio recordings were kept on a password-protected personal computer.

Two of three interviews took place in quiet, public locations (both cafés) recommended by each participant (one in the UK, one in the USA). The researcher was present at the agreed location at least thirty minutes prior to the interview, to ensure the recording equipment was fully functioning, and there was sufficient silence and limited distraction which could hinder both the flow of the interview and quality of the audio (Chadwick et al. 2008). Before commencing the interviews, the researcher reminded each participant of their rights, and ensured there were no further questions or concerns to be addressed. The third interview took place via a Skype video call, and the time was arranged by the participant and agreed by the researcher. Skype is an online video-calling programme which is becoming increasingly popular in qualitative research, and has recently been described as a convenient, effective methodology for data collection (Coulson 2015). The interviews lasted between thirty-five and fifty-five minutes.

Analysis of transcripts

A systematic process of analysis was established by adopting a step-by-step procedure from the guidelines offered by Smith and Osborne (2015). The first step was to re-read each transcript a number of times in order to familiarize with the data. Following this, line-by-line coding led to some ideas for emerging themes. The first author then returned to engage in further research about IPA (e.g. Smith 2011b), which provided instruction for how to detect prominent themes when reading through interview transcripts. Smith (2011b) discussed flagging up the most suggestive quotes, which he refers to as ‘gems’. Following this guideline, a new document was created containing the most prominent quotes, which were separated into two columns: ‘direct’ for those which were plainly stated, and ‘suggestive’, which required a deeper level of interpretation.

Following this step, each transcript was revisited, and annotations were added in a separate document, resulting in the development of emergent themes. After this clustering was adopted to identify similarities between the overall patterns of themes across all participants, whilst allowing for instances of divergence within their accounts. Once all emergent themes were clustered, the development of the superordinate themes took place.
Once themes were identified, each transcript was reviewed to highlight each quote in a colour corresponding to the relevant theme, thus, each transcript was re-read another four times each, ensuring thorough familiarity. These quotations were then copied into a new document to their corresponding section for each participant, each theme. The most relevant quotes from the ‘superordinate themes’ document were then copied into the left-hand margin of a new document to allow for further interpretation in the right-hand margin. Finally, the extracts were copied for each participant into a draft ‘Results’ section, and wrote an interpretative commentary about each one. At least one extract was taken from each participant for each theme, adhering to standards of IPA practice (Smith 2011a). Between one and three extracts were used per participant, depending on the level of relevance per theme.

*Reflexivity*

Langdridge (2007: 4) points out that the phenomenological paradigm has ‘an epistemological focus on experience (rather than a real knowledgeable world) and so require ways of capturing this that are subjective and involved.’ In order to engage with the associated ontology that the individual is a meaning-maker it is essential that as researchers we are acknowledged as part of the process. We too made meaning of the data, which as highlighted in the introduction, is captured in Smith’s version of phenomenology with the term ‘double hermeneutic’; in order to illustrate this further, it is important to offer a transparent account of the relative role each author played in the process outlined above. The ‘Analysis of the transcripts’ section indicates that the first author conducted the majority of the analysis. However, at each stage the second author was also involved in discussions (and at times re-analysis and coding) to consider the validity of the themes as they emerged and provide a credibility check (validity in qualitative methods is discussed further in the final section of this paper). The first author has himself had a career in the modelling industry. This provided an ‘insider perspective’, which was useful in terms of having contacts within the industry when seeking people to interview, designing the questions and establishing rapport with participants. However, it is also acknowledged that such knowledge could potentially lead to a focus on extracts which resonate more with the researcher, hence the importance of a further researcher also being involved. Author two has no knowledge of the fashion industry, has more general expertise in applied qualitative
methods and as such, she was able to provide a more independent perspective. Taken together, these respective roles enhanced the trustworthiness and validity of the study.

**Results**

The three most salient super-ordinate themes identified were: ‘Growth and Development’, ‘Changes in Self-Perception’, and ‘A Job? Or a Way of Life?’. These are outlined below with illustrative extracts and the authors’ interpretative commentary.

*Growth and Development*

All participants acknowledged that personal growth and development had taken place as an integral part of their occupation. Some suggested that this development was a consequence of a direct attempt made by modelling industry professionals to change them, whilst other examples highlighted how it was learned indirectly through their experience of fashion modelling. For example, the following extract by Anna implies that her modelling agency stimulated her development, encouraging her to be genuine and to appear more self-confident:

‘my agency were always telling me have personality, be yourself... so yeah just a lot of confidence, I’ve still got that now, that’s what they taught me, just always be yourself’

Here, Anna illustrates that her development was a result of intentional teachings whilst modelling. Her learned ability to ‘be yourself’ and become more self-confident lasted longer than the duration of her career, and are life lessons which she has retained. Similarly, in the following extract, Lara recalls that her growth was a direct product of modelling:

‘Life slaps you in the face and you’re just like okay, you get stronger, you learn how to become an adult, you learn how to take rejection, you learn how to be stronger, you learn confidence, you learn all this stuff... that I didn’t have back then... because I was scared, I was awkward, I just wanted people to like me...’

This extract highlights how, during her modelling career, Lara reports undergoing a transition into adulthood. Her character pre-modelling appeared more child-like. She was fearful, uncomfortable, and seeking to please others. However, modelling proved transformative. The powerful analogy of being ‘slapped in the face’ captures the sharp
shock experienced. Following this, Lara experienced a self-reported increase in character strength and maturity, and demonstrates increased resilience when handling rejection. This was the biggest change Lara discussed during her interview, and she suggested that it occurred in a short time-frame, and at a considerably young age:

‘Doing what I do now, you learn so much in life, so quickly, at such a young age…’

This implies that the beginning of her modelling career threw her into an accelerated phase of development. Lara views her occupation not only as a career, but as a character developing journey which she feels has taught her much about life. George also reports that he has changed:

‘Okay.. values have changed.. because like I said I concentrate a lot more on my appearance and everything now, whereas before like I said I was just happy… umm... so I guess on the whole I was probably… happy... I wouldn’t say I was happier before than now... but like I wouldn’t worry so much…’

The implication here is that George’s experiences of change were not all positive:

‘Before I was just happy with whatever, reasonably confident... and I guess now it changes... it fluctuates... so like I will feel really confident if I feel good... And I look good…’

He seems to be effected more by how he feels about his appearance since becoming a model, noting that he feels more confident if he looks good. This extract also suggests that his happiness is less stable, which may be linked to his fluctuating confidence regarding appearance. This is supported in the following quote:

‘it’s kind of like an unusual balance of either feeling super good or like bad... whereas before it was more of a stable sort of content state all the time..’

In his interview, George revealed that working in the modelling industry has changed his outlook, leaving him experiencing either very positive or very negative feelings in relation to how he looked and felt. This may be associated with changes in self-perception, which is the focus of the next theme.

Changes in Self-Perception
Modelling involves the judgement of one’s appearance, therefore it is not surprising that this affects how models may perceive themselves. All participants experienced a change in self-perception, the outcome of which differed across the sample. George experienced a negative change in self-perception, to the point of increased self-scrutiny:

‘You are permanently worrying about your appearance just because I guess it is drilled into you’

Firstly, George indicates a constant awareness of his appearance as a result of being a fashion model. Secondly, he suggests that the causal factor of this consciousness of his image is the industry itself: ‘it is drilled into you’ implies a very active and deliberate effort to impose upon him the importance of appearance. The use of the verb ‘drilling’ is revealing, defined as: ‘Intensive instruction or training in something, typically by means of repeated exercises’ (ODE 2010). It is also apparent from this quote that his prioritised sense of appearance is still evident even when not modelling. This can be supported by George’s use of the word ‘permanent’ suggesting irreversible effects. The use of the word ‘worry’ indicates an element of anxiety, not just awareness of his appearance. This reinforces the consideration that his career as a fashion model not only affected his self-perception, but also his priorities, as observed in the following segment. Note George’s use of the words ‘before’ and ‘now’, suggesting a clear difference caused by his career:

‘It’s like if you stand back and look at a painting and think ‘that’s a nice painting’... that’s what it was like before... but now It’s like going over the painting with a magnifying glass looking at every single detail and seeing what could be wrong rather than what’s right...’

Here, George offers a metaphor which indicated a clear increase in self-scrutiny. ‘That’s what it was like before’ implies a recognition of difference between pre and post modelling status. The use of the ‘magnifying glass’ reveals great attention to detail when considering his appearance, to the point of over-scrutiny. George also considers what he could do to enhance or change aspects of his appearance that do not meet his newfound standards: ‘looking at every single detail and seeing what could be wrong’ suggests that George considers it his own responsibility to modify or alter his appearance to meet the modelling industry’s standards (or of which the industry has ‘drilled’ into him). Furthermore, George
recognises his tendency after the commencement of his modelling career to consider ‘what could be wrong’ rather than his previous tendency to appreciate ‘what’s right’.

In contrast, for both Anna and Lara being judged in this way led to a positive change in self-perception, reporting increased confidence in their appearance since modelling:

‘like they [her modelling agency] told me walk into a room, be tall and be confident... so I think that’s the good part of it... it did make me grow up... and be a lot more confident within myself... even about image now...’ (Anna)

Anna revealed that her positive change in self-perception was a consequence of a direct attempt made by her modelling agency to induce self-confidence. As in the previous theme, this was also linked to becoming more mature and developing an increased self-confidence through modelling. This made her less critical of her appearance, even after modelling.

Similarly, Lara shared her experience of developing a more positive self-perception:

‘But I was like tall and gawky and didn’t understand how to be comfortable in my body, until like modelling came around’ (Lara)

She discussed how modelling caused a reduction in her self-scrutiny, enabling her to feel ‘comfortable in her own body’. Thus, each participant experienced a change in self-confidence, though the catalyst for this throughout appeared to be modelling itself. Clearly, the occupation impacted on Anna, Lara and George, and the final theme highlights how they experienced the job of a fashion model.

A Job? Or a Way of Life?

All participants felt that modelling is more than just a job. ‘A Job? Or a Way of Life?’ explores the commitment made as a fashion model, and considers it in comparison to other careers discussed during the interviews. Anna offered her experience of the commitment involved in modelling in the following quote:

‘I think it consciously has to be on your mind all the time, [be]cause it’s about how you look, how you present yourself, so you can’t be like going out drinking loads, [be]cause it comes out in your face, and stuff like that... so yeah I find it quite hard to like balance everything’
Here a constant awareness of the role, even when not modelling, is revealed, which may constrain certain social activities, i.e. ‘can’t be going out drinking loads.’ A high level of commitment is required to be a fashion model, to the point of interference with personal lifestyles outside the workplace. These seem to be fairly extreme changes to make to one’s lifestyle in order to fit the standards of a career, yet it seems that few boundaries exist between Anna’s professional and personal life.

The suggestion that modelling is a way of life, not just a job was also evidenced in Anna’s narrative:

‘It is a lifestyle not just a job... just like for athletes... it sounds silly but I think a model’s job is similar to an athlete’

Here, it can be observed that Anna compares her role whilst modelling to that of an athlete. The life of an athlete typically involves a high level of discipline, rigorous schedule of exercise, and strict dietary limitations. It appeared from the interviews that modelling, like athletics, allows no ‘break’ from work. Just like athletes, models undergo a constant effort requiring much commitment, even whilst not modelling. A comparison to athletes was also made by George, who described a similar structured lifestyle:

‘If like you asked an athlete or a runner... how many hours do you work a week and they do 10 hours actual running, then they probably wouldn’t include the like 30 hours of training and everything else [be]cause they just think about the actual running’

The sense here that modelling, like athletics, has an element of ‘backstage’ work and preparation which may not be revealed to those outside of the industry seems to explain the further comments George made in his interview:

‘It does affect you personally more than you would realise...’

‘It’s something that will become part of you...’

If one is constantly aware of modelling and adopting a strict lifestyle in order to meet the requirements of the job, it could be argued that this exceedingly high commitment to one’s career could result in extreme emotional attachment, to the point of embodiment, as the fore-mentioned quotes suggest. This emotional attachment was elaborated in the following extracts by Lara:
‘The only way you’re gunna [going to] survive in this industry is to be able to emotionally detach yourself from what the clients say to you… from all the rejection’

‘It’s the only way you’re gunna [going to] survive… if not you’re gunna [going to] go crazy…’

Interestingly, Lara suggests that in order to remain in the modelling industry, one must detach emotionally from comments made by others. In the first segment, Lara positions ‘survival’ in opposition to ‘going crazy’. In order to go crazy, one might expect an outpouring of emotion, and being out of control. So, emotional detachment is seen as ‘survival’ here, and the opposition of survival, failure, is seen as an emotional outburst. Analysis of her quote suggests that a fashion model must monitor not only their lifestyles and behaviours, but also their emotions.

These extracts indicate the level of commitment associated with being a fashion model. It could be argued that fashion modelling is all consuming, involving commitments which exceed ‘office hours’, limitations to one’s personal life, and the management of one’s emotions. This appears to go beyond the general expectations related to any ‘job’.

Discussing

This study explored the lived experience of young people who are fashion models, seeking to find out ‘What do those who work as models in the fashion industry experience during their modelling careers?’ and ‘How do they make sense of this role?’. Findings indicated that change was an integral part of their experience, leading to a range of emotions and a sense of both positive and negative growth and developmental experiences. The role itself was acknowledged to be an all-encompassing lifestyle, rather than a job. The three participants’ narratives revealed elements of both convergence and divergence in the way they dealt with this. These ideas were revealed via three themes which are summarised in order below and discussed in relation to the existing literature and possibilities for future research.

The first theme outlined elements of each participant’s ‘Growth and Development’. Meyer et al. (2007) proposed that models may experience elevated rates of psychological maladjustment. Whilst we cannot make such claims from a qualitative study, George’s account did reveal that the role of being a fashion model had a detrimental effect at times, for example on his mood and self-confidence. It could be argued that such findings indicate
that working in the industry had an impact on his general wellbeing. However, both Anna and Lara demonstrated positive growth and development, including self-reported increases in self-confidence, self-esteem, strength, maturity, and resilience; these revealed various ways in which the role could be seen as having benefited them psychologically. The findings as a whole suggest that being a fashion model entails much more than the superficial qualities which have previously been the focus of research within this field.

The second theme also demonstrated that modelling can have a positive or negative impact, here in relation to ‘Changes in Self-Perception’. Both Anna and Lara indicated that their self-confidence and self-esteem increased due to their roles, showing a positive change in self-perception. George, however, demonstrated higher self-reported levels of self-scrutiny, likening his perception as a model to examining a painting with a magnifying glass, ‘looking for flaws’. It was noted in the introduction that past research has identified that the consumers of fashion magazines (typically young women) have exhibited increases in body dissatisfaction and decreases in self-esteem when viewing images of models (e.g. Ahern et al. 2011; Choi et al. 2008; Clay et al. 2005). George’s narrative hints at him also suffering such ill-effects. A finding which raises alarm in relation to body image and the impact that working in a profession where one is on show may have at a psychosocial level. In the case of Anna and Lara, however, their narratives were rich with self-reported accounts of the positive effects of modelling, demonstrating the potential benefits for one’s psychological wellbeing. It seems that further research is required in this area to identify both potentially protective and damaging features of modelling on individuals working in the fashion industry.

The way in which participants made sense of their role was illustrated further in the final theme, ‘A Job? Or a Way of Life?’. This was evident not only in the ways in which they reported modelling affected them at a personal level (discussed in the previous two themes); but also in Anna and George’s self-comparisons between the role of a model and an athlete. It appeared that being a fashion model requires one to be constantly aware of appearance, and as such, the world of work is never far away. It was implied that there is little discrepancy between personal and professional lives, demonstrating an exceptionally high level of commitment. The results show that, like an athlete, models must adopt an extreme lifestyle in order to meet the requirements of their role. Research within Sport
Psychology reveals that an athletic identity is often formed amongst those immersed in such roles (Ronkainen et al. 2016; Brewer et al. 1993) and it is likely that such occupational identities are part of the fashion models sense of self also; something which merits further research.

This study specifically focused on young people, the age range being 18 to 25 years of age. We now consider the significance of this in terms of life-course development. Arnett (2000) proposed a theory of ‘emerging adulthood’ to describe this period as a distinct feature of the developmental trajectory in western cultures. He views this as the most volitional time of life, offering opportunities for independent exploration in areas such as love, world views and work. Individuals may, for example, try a number of jobs or engage in educational courses to build the foundation for later careers. The transition into adulthood involves accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent, which tends to be a fluid process which many achieve by the end of the emerging adulthood phase (Arnett 2000). It might be argued from the findings of this study that the world of modelling offers opportunities for this (e.g. identity exploration, taking personal responsibility, being independent). Anna actually talked about feeling that she had become an adult as a consequence of the job, and the themes identified suggest that participants underwent a period of self-reflection as an integral part of the job.

It is interesting that, as noted in the introduction, a high percentage of models start their career in their teens. It could be suggested that the demands of fashion modelling at such an early age may elevate the period of extended adulthood to occur slightly earlier. Although not all contemporary Developmental Psychologists agree with imposing such age ranges on developmental processes (some preferring to view development as outcomes of having the appropriate resources to deal with the challenges of transition, e.g. Kloep and Hendry 2014; Kloep et al. 2009), it seems that the demands an occupation such as fashion modelling puts on individuals and the role this may play in the transition to adulthood is a fruitful avenue for further research. Might modelling be a catalyst for such transitions? Adopting conceptual frameworks such as those proposed by Arnett (2000) or Kloep et al. (2009) offers a lens through which such ideas could be explored.

*Validity in Qualitative Research*
Yardley (2000) offers a broad set of principles for researchers to draw upon to demonstrate the validity and trustworthiness of qualitative studies. Here, we offer examples from the present research to address this important issue and illustrate how these principles have been adhered to. The first, ‘sensitivity to context’, is illustrated in the review of previous research highlighting key findings from the wider field and identifying gaps in the current literature. This allowed the research area to be contextualised, and the importance of the specific research questions and aim to be identified. ‘Sensitivity to context’ is further evidenced by the sensitivity towards, and commitment to, the topic area the first author exhibits. He was himself a fashion model at a similar age to the sample of this study, and his own experiences inspired him to conduct research in this field. All participants were made aware of this, something which the researchers considered important in establishing both rapport and empathy with them during the interview process. His ‘insider’ knowledge relating to what the job entailed facilitated the design of the study, especially when discussing the interview schedule. ‘Transparency’ is achieved within the introduction and method section by offering an account of the background of IPA and how it is an appropriate approach for a study of this nature, and outlining both the design of the interview schedule and the analytic procedure. Additionally, in the presentation of the findings, interpretative commentaries are supported by selected quotations which provide clear links for the reader to establish the trustworthiness of the analysis. Finally, the ‘impact and importance’ of the findings for both those interested in the field of fashion studies and Psychology are directly addressed in the discussion and conclusion.

**Study Limitations**

Although the size of sample resonates with IPA’s commitment to idiographic research, it would be perilous to make any claims of generalisability from three individuals’ accounts. The small sample facilitated detailed explications of each participant’s narrative about their work as fashion models, allowing areas of convergence and divergence to be discussed. This provides a counter position to previous research which, as discussed in the introduction, seems to either glamorize or pathologise modelling. Whilst some extracts may resonate with experiences of others in the modelling industry, it is suggested that this is essentially viewed as an exploratory study. This is important when, as in this case, an under-researched area is being explored, for identifying potential themes which warrant further exploration.
It is clear that this paper is written from the perspective of two individuals with a commitment to Phenomenological approaches to Psychology, and its associated ontology. As such it is likely that such discipline knowledge will have framed the interpretation, suggested implications and further research. We acknowledge that a researcher writing from a different discipline, for example a sociological perspective, may ask different questions and look at the data through a different lens.

**Conclusion**

As an exploratory study, this work makes a contribution to the sparse literature relating to the experiences of fashion modelling, particularly for young people in the industry. The study reveals that being a fashion model might lead to both positive and negative changes to one’s psychological development, significantly affecting an individual’s self-perception, self-confidence and maturity. It was also suggested that modelling is an all-encompassing lifestyle rather than a job, with each participant demonstrating exceptional commitment to one’s role. Taking these changes into consideration it is proposed that modelling could act as a catalyst into adulthood. Whilst we are cautious not to generalise, our discussion identifies aspects which may merit further attention from psychological sub-disciplines such as Health Psychology (wellbeing), Occupational Psychology (work identities) and Developmental Psychology (transitions into adulthood). We urge those in these cognate areas to do this in order to develop and extend further the psychological literature base in the field of fashion studies.

**References**


