**Body image in female adolescent Girlguides**

**Abstract**

The study was designed to explore body image in a group of adolescent females, who were all members of the Girlguiding community. The study used two focus groups, with a total of seven participants between the ages of twelve and seventeen, to conduct an exploratory thematic analysis of the participants’ body image and the factors that they felt influenced it. Four themes were identified: “Emotions and Feelings”, “Conversations and Critiques”, “Weight and Size” and “Influences on Body Image”. The results of the study found that on the whole, the participants reported having positive body image and feeling positively about their bodies, however they also identified areas that made them feel more negatively about their appearance, for example social media and the media in general. Implications include the need for further education in schools and at home about body image and appearance.

**Key Words:**

Adolescent, Body Image, Appearance, Social Media, Relationships, Girlguiding,

**Key Points:**

This study has shown that these British adolescents did in general have positive feelings about their appearance and body image

However, the study also showed that the adolescents did experience some negative aspects and thoughts about their appearance, often impacted by outside influences such as social media or comments from peers

Therefore, there is a need for interventions and conversations in schools that encourage positive body image and body acceptance, for example as part of the PSHE curriculum

**Reflective Questions:**

Does the way you talk about your own body have an impact on the people around you?

Is there anything you can do in your day-to-day discussions with young people that might impact their body image more positively?

What methods could you use to help foster body positivity in the young people you speak to?

**Introduction**  
Body image is defined as “a person’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body” (Grogan 2008 p3). Adolescence is a critical period for the development of body image (Morin et al 2017). and many influences exist during the teen years including transitions (e.g. puberty) that can have an impact on an adolescents’ thoughts and feelings about their body (Voelker et al. 2015).

While pressure to obtain the ‘ideal’ body image can result in negative body image, even females with positive body image may have worries about their appearance: facial beauty, height, race, size and weight can all be objects of concern (Grogan 2016). The UK Government’s ‘Body Confidence Campaign’ in 2015 reported that “body image is an issue of enormous public concern, especially to parents and young people” (Body Confidence Campaign Report 2015 p5), and it has been reported that poor body image is a contributory factor in poor mental wellbeing, eating disorders, obesity, low aspirations and a range of risky behaviours including self-harm and unsafe sex, especially among women and girls (Littleton et al 2005). Following the findings of the Girls’ Attitudes Survey (Girlguiding 2016) which highlighted body image as a key concern among the members of the organisation, this study seeks to explore thoughts not only about size and weight, but also what adolescents feel impacts their body image.

The current study is unique in its sample population being female adolescents who are members of the Girlguiding organisation. Girlguiding is an organisation whose mission is to empower girls, giving them the best possible chance to be the best people they can be (Girlguiding 2018). The ‘Girl’s Attitudes Survey’ (Girlguiding 2016), recorded that almost half of all its members aged between 11 and 21 claim that the way they look holds them back. Sixty-one percent of members aged between 7 and 21 were happy with the way they looked; indicating that almost 40% of the children and adolescents surveyed, were unhappy with their appearance. The report published the survey results and explained that girls as young as s years old have been victims of body criticism and that body dissatisfaction peaks as adolescents transition into young adults. Girlguiding itself has highlighted this problem as a vital area for improvement, after releasing a body image focused challenge badge in partnership with Dove (Girlguiding 2014).

The present study aimed to find out more about adolescents’ body image, by using in depth focus groups, where the participants were able to discuss their thoughts and feelings about their body image with a group of peers. The authors were also interested in seeing whether the participants’ membership of Girlguiding appeared to have any impact on their thoughts and feelings about body image and appearance pressures.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were recruited from Girlguiding units in the Midlands, UK, through invitational letters to both participants and parents. Seven female adolescents aged between 12 and 17 were recruited to engage in two separate focus groups, the first focus group included four from the Senior Section unit (girls aged 14-17) and the second focus group included three females from the Guide unit (girls aged 12).

**Data collection and Analysis**

Focus groups were chosen as the method of data collection for the study. It can be seen that focus group discussions are more like natural, social interaction for participants, with benefits including individuals being more likely to provide candid responses (Leung and Savithiri 2009). The authors felt that due to the age of participants and topic being studied, they would feel more comfortable talking in a group than in a one-on-one situation, and it would allow for more discussion between the participants.

A brief pilot study of the appropriateness of the questions was completed with a single participant selected from an opportunity sample who was not part of the study sample. The schedule questions were written by the researcher, with partial inspiration from the ‘Girls’ Attitudes Survey’ (Girlguiding 2016), as well as Diedrichs et al. (2016). The schedule consisted of nine questions, included questions such as “How do you feel about the way you look?”.

Participants were chosen via opportunity sampling in the Guiding unit – the participants who gained consent from their parent/carer, and consented to taking part themselves, took part in the study. The focus groups took place in a room separated from, but next to their usual meeting room. The group sat at a table with a Dictaphone recording responses given to the questions asked. The focus groups had an approximate duration of 30 minutes, after which the participants were debriefed and thanked for taking part in the study. The participants were given a debrief form which included a link to the Girlguiding website and a link to the mental health charity Mind (Mind, 2017), and were offered two workbooks about improving body image.Theparticipants were also given the details of the researchers, if they had any concerns or questions in the future. The interviews were then transcribed, and participants were given pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity.

**Ethical approval and consent**

The study received ethical approval from the Staffordshire University Ethics Committee, and the ethical guidelines from the British Psychological Society (BPS 2009) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011) were used to inform ethical practice throughout.

Four months prior to the study commencing, the adult leader at the Guides and Rangers group was approached and asked if she would be willing for the study to be carried out in the groups. She agreed, and written permission was gained from her. Two months prior to the focus groups taking place, the adolescents were given consent letters to take home to their parent/carer. Parents/carers were asked to return the form if they consented to their child participating in the study.

At the time of the focus group, the participants were given an information to read through, which contained information about the study and what they would be required to do in the focus group, as well as informing them that they would be recorded during the session. The focus group facilitator verbally spoke to each participant to ensure they were happy to take part in the study, and checked whether they had any questions. If they were happy to continue, they were asked to sign a consent form.

**Results**

Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts of the interviews following guidelines from Braun and Clarke (2006). Four key themes were identified: Emotions and Feelings, Conversations and Critiques, Weight and Size and Influences on Body Image.

Figure 1 shows the key themes and interlinking sub-themes.

**Emotions and Feelings**

*Family Influences*

**Conversations and Critiques**

*Media Influences*

**Weight and Size**

**Influences on body image**

*Social Influences*

*Impact of Girlguiding*

Figure 1. The key themes that arose from the individual sessions, and the interlinking sub-themes

**Emotions and Feelings: “I feel happy about my body size and shape.”**

On the whole, participants reported feeling positive about their appearance and body image, for example:

“I feel happy about my body size and shape. I can confidently wear crop tops without worrying. I can wear whatever I want really and I feel happy” (Olivia, Focus Group 2)

“I feel good about my body. It doesn’t really bother me” (Chloe, Focus Group 2)

However, participants did also talk about body image insecurities, both in the past and in the present. For example, Clover talked about how in the past she had felt more negatively about her appearance, but that with some support and encouragement from her mother she felt more positive about her appearance:

“A couple of years ago I would never wear crop tops because I was bigger than everyone and I felt insecure wearing them but ever since my mum spoke to me about body image and stuff I don’t really see it as a problem. I just wear whatever I want to (...) because I feel comfortable and happy.” (Clover, Focus Group 1)

Many of the participants argued that their happiness was not related to their size. The participants in both focus groups implied that an individual who focuses on their own happiness may be likely to have a positive body image, in contrast to an individual who believes happiness is ascertained through an ideal size, for example:

“I think people aren't happy with themselves a lot of the time because they think they're fat or unfit or unhealthy because they don't look like everyone else. It's so stupid really because everyone's different and there's no right or wrong way to look.” (Chloe, Focus Group 2)

Participants also commented on how much comments of others can have adverse effects on emotions, but that individuals must take no notice and instead embrace their differences as unique beauty. This link highlights the basis of the second theme.

**Conversations and Critiques: “ They’re the ones judging me and I don’t know what their reason is”**

This theme uncovered the participants’ first-hand experiences of comments from others, which included both positive and negative aspects. Alice, for example, talked about experiencing negative comments about her appearance, and how these impacted her:

“Sometimes some not very nice things get said by so-called friends, people I’m not friends with anymore, obviously because they weren’t very nice people, but one said something that stuck with me for ages and made me feel really down. But now I have forgotten what they said so I got over it eventually, but it definitely took time.” (Alice, Focus Group 1)

On the whole, the participants reported having little first-hand experience of unwanted critiques, and reported that they had learned to ignore comments and judgements that may be made to or about them. They did, however, recognise that some people may be yet to develop the patience needed to do this, and all felt that judgements from others are never justified. For example, Clover said:

“I don’t really care about their negative thoughts because I feel comfortable and happy they won’t stop me. They’re the ones judging me and I don’t know what their reason is but they shouldn’t be judging if you don’t like it don’t look at me. Simple.” (Clover, Focus Group 1)

**Weight and size: “It makes me feel self-conscious at times and like I should lose weight.”**

In general, the participants appeared to share a positive and accepting outlook towards the size and weight of others, but indicated that they sometimes worried about their own weight or size increasing, leading to a lapse in their overall body positivity:

“I guess I was having a bit of a panic attack really because I thought I was gaining weight that I wasn’t supposed to.” (Maisie, Focus Group 1)

Some participants reported comparing their size and weight to that of others, especially those with hobbies which may include uniforms which show more skin than others, for example, swimming:

“I feel self-conscious sometimes of swimming where everybody’s so thin and everything and it makes me feel self-conscious at times and like I should lose weight. But normally I’m not that bad” (Blossom, Focus Group 1)

**Influences on Body Image: “I don’t feel particularly…good looking but I think that’s influenced by social media”**

Participants identified a number of areas that they felt had impacted on their body image, both positively and/or negatively. This theme incorporated four subthemes: Impact of Girlguiding, Social Influences, Family Influences and Media Influences.

**Impact of Girlguiding**

The participants depicted Girlguiding as a fun, safe place to learn new skills, take part in sports and create strong friendships. The participants reported that Girlguiding has helped their body image (and other personal development):

“I would say it’s definitely had a positive influence on how you view your body image because like when you come here you meet new people, of all different shapes and sizes (…) it gives you a different perspective and it reassures you that you can be this way or that way and be happy and normal. It makes you feel happier with yourself when everyone else is happy with themselves too. A positive environment rubs off.” (Maisie, Focus Group 1)

Participants further spoke about the benefits of Girlguiding on their body image, in terms of activities that they could take part in, that would help them in terms of appreciation for their bodies:

“I know there are badges that we have done in the past that have incorporated stuff to help even if not directly for it. Like fitness and healthy eating and confidence etc.” (Maisie, Focus Group 1)

**Social Influences**

Alongside Girlguiding, the participants talked about other factors that they felt had influenced their body image. One of the main influences they discussed was social media. It is important to note that the four main social media websites or applications that the participants reference all have a minimum age limit of thirteen (Office of the eSafety Commissioner 2016). Three participants in the second group were twelve years of age but had all used at least one of these social media platforms. The participants all appeared to be aware of implications associated with the use of social media on body image; general mental health may also be affected by prolonged exposure. The younger participants, although not keeping to the rulings, suggested that they are in place to protect them and delay or stop some of the body image concerns that can arise over time.

“I guess it means we don’t see stuff as young that maybe isn’t really good for us, maybe the younger you are when you see stuff you can feel differently about it.” (Sophie, Focus Group 2)

The older participants explicitly linked some of their body image concerns by explaining their cause as social media use:

“I don’t feel particularly…good looking but I think that’s influenced by social media and people posting things that look very I dunno like unrealistic goals for people of that age.” (Maisie, Focus Group 1)

“When people go through social media, they find people who have these amazing body shapes which they love and then they want to look exactly like them. But that means they're aspiring to be someone else instead of themselves” (Sophie, Focus Group 2)

The participants also talked about the impact that they felt friendships could have on their body image. Participants all spoke highly of their friendships, and the impact they could have on their body image, for example:

“Friends always try and compliment you on how you look, your clothes and your figure (…) they make you feel good about yourself” (Chloe, Focus Group 2)

**Family Influences**

As well as social media and friendships, participants discussed the impact of parents and other family members on their body image. A number of participants reported feeling grateful for the role that their mothers had played in encouraging their positive body image. This backs up previous findings that have suggested that a close maternal relationship may have a lasting impact on body image (Diedrichs et al. 2016; Usmiani and Daniluk 1997).

“Mum reassured me she was like ‘No you’re fine! Don’t worry!’ So now every so often she’s like reminding me ‘you are beautiful!’” (Maisie, Group 1)

“I think family has a big impact on how I feel about my body image because I know I feel alright with my body image because of how I’ve been brought up. My family taught me you don’t have to be skinny you don’t have to be good looking and wear lots of make-up as long as you feel comfortable in your own skin.” (Maisie, Focus Group 1)

**Media Influences**

Participants highlighted that they felt there were unrealistic ideals set by the fashion industry and the wider media in general, for example in terms of clothing and beauty brands’ choice of models:

“Some of the famous models who are really stick thin, like, they’re over pronounced of how thin they are and especially as the industry photoshops most of the model’s fat and stuff off. Like even the plus-size, they smooth the fat and stretch marks.” (Alice, Focus Group 1)

A number of participants posed the question of why it was that most clothing is shown on more slender women. The participants identified a need to reduce the comparisons between a real figure and a heavily altered, often unhealthy figure.

“I think maybe they should focus stuff more towards normal average people than thin people (…) but thin doesn’t mean healthy, sometimes the opposite. People get too obsessed with it.” (Chloe, Focus Group 2)

**Discussion**:

Exploring influencing factors on body image in female adolescents is a crucial task in reducing body image negativity in both adolescents, as well as into adulthood. In the results produced by this study, all participants reported having a relatively positive body image though they did all discuss the subject of influences that have had negative impacts on their body image. Participants detailed experiencing both positive and negative emotions in relation to their body image, for example from negative comments from peers, to positive comments from parents.

The comments of others did appear to play a key role in adolescents’ body image, with participants in this study disclosing that experiences of hurtful comments have had adverse effects on their body image. This supports previous research which has highlighted frequent negative comments as an influencing factor for a negative appearance evaluation (Kvalem, von Soest et al. 2006). Rodgers, Paxton and Chabrol (2009) discovered that parental comments, both positive and negative in nature, related directly to body image satisfaction in female adolescents, highlighting the role of parental influence in body dissatisfaction development. Overall in the present study, parental comments appeared to be supportive of the teen, to reassure them and encourage body positivity.

Participants reported that influences such as the media and social media had also negatively impacted their body image. This backs up previous research, for example Eyal (2013) found that media exposure negatively predicted body image, for example through comparisons with favourite characters on television programmes, and comparing their body size to people in the media. Additionally, Ho et al (2016) found that social media use was related to adolescents’ being dissatisfied with their body image. This really emphasises the importance of good education about body image, and realistic body image expectations in adolescence.

The present study aimed to explore factors which influence both positive and negative body image: body image cannot be entirely understood without attempting to explore all possible influences. Improving negative body image among the adolescent population is often influenced by a reduction in damaging behaviours such as: minimising exposure to unrealistic ideal imagery, encouraging healthier physical activity and managing dieting behaviour (Collins-Donnelly, 2014). A focus on positive body image influences may also help to improve body image positivity; examining influential aspects such as family and peer relationships can discover and strengthen bonds which, if encouraged, can further enhance body positivity.

**Limitations**

The study was conducted at just one site, with a small sample of all white British female participants who attended Girlguiding meetings, thus the findings may not apply to other parts of the UK, and with other groups of young people. In future, it would be useful to carry out the research with a larger sample, and also to carry out the research with males to see if they have different body image concerns.

Additionally, all data was collected using focus groups. Although focus groups do have many advantages, there are also limitations to using just this one method of data collection. It is possible that some of the participants did not feel comfortable discussing aspects of their body image in front of their peers, and would have felt more at ease talking about them in an individual interview. In future, it would be useful to use a combination of both focus groups and individual sessions.

**Recommendations for health promotion in schools:**

The research has indicated a number of implications which should be considered in schools. The participants all talked about the impact that hearing negative comments about their weight had on them, and some of the participants talked about how these comments stayed with them for a long time afterwards. It is therefore important to speak to children and adolescents about the impact that their words can have on people and their feelings about their bodies, not just in the short term, but in the long term. Participants also talked about the positives of being a member of an organisation such as Girlguiding, on maintaining a positive body image. This is something that can be encouraged in schools, for example through encouraging membership of group participation both inside and outside of the classroom. Participants also talked about the influence of factors such as the media and social media, and how this made them think more negatively about their appearance. It is of vital importance for young people in school to be more widely informed about social media, and elements such as airbrushing and filters, so that they are more aware of how these images are formed, and that they may not be a ‘true’ representation of real life.

Voluntary organisations such as Girlguiding, Scouts, ballet/dance groups and sport clubs also have an important role to play in this area, alongside schools, through discussions and education about body image, in both young women and young men. As mentioned earlier, Girlguiding have released a body image focused challenge badge in partnership with Dove (Girlguiding 2014), which is a really positive step forward in helping their members develop and maintain a more positive attitude towards their bodies.

**Conclusion:**

The study has shown that the participants did have positive feelings about their body image in general, however it has also identified a number of areas that might impact adolescents’ feelings about their bodies, for example parental influence and social media. This can be used in future health promotion in schools, for example through class discussions and reflecting on previous experiences, as well as sharing information with students about photographs used in the media which may be airbrushed or filtered.

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