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Adolescent Girls and Body Image: Influence of Outdoor Adventure on Healthy Living

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Abstract

Outdoor adventure may improve body image. However, minimal research exists on the effect outdoor adventure has on body image in adolescent girls, a demographic continually plagued by negative body image. In response, this exploratory study considered the influence of one outdoor adventure program in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through questionnaires and focus groups, 13 high school-aged GirlVentures, Inc. (GV), alumnae discussed body image in the context of “healthy living” and the effect their course had on personal body image. Results show key influences included instructors, other girls on course, and the natural environment. All participants perceived their program as positively influencing their body image during and directly following their course, and most ($n = 9$) perceived their program as still positively influencing their body image up to 3 years postcourse. Findings offer insight to GV and can provide new information for other outdoor adventure organizations to promote healthy development in adolescent girls.

KEYWORDS: adolescent girls; outdoor adventure; body image; health

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Continually bombarded with media and social pressures to achieve unrealistic beauty standards, adolescent girls in Western society are disproportionately afflicted with negative body image compared to adolescent boys (Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2006; Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2008; Linder, Russell-Mayhew, Adair, & McLaren, 2012; Slater & Tiggeman, 2010). Previous studies on girls' outdoor adventure programs include improved body image among findings (Whittington, 2006; Whittington & Nixon Mack, 2010; Whittington, Nixon Mack, Budbill, & McKenney, 2011). However, few studies found to date were designed to focus on the effect of outdoor adventure on girls' body image specifically, and results include the need for further research (Budbill, 2008; Edwards-Leeper, 2004; Parsons, 2010).

Using phenomenological inquiry, we explored the influence of outdoor adventure on body image in adolescent girls through the unique experiences of alumnae from GirlVentures, Inc. (GV), a culturally diverse youth organization in San Francisco. Based on the Barr-Wilson (2012) thesis, results reflect the potential for GV's programs to influence body image and, more broadly, to contribute to the growing body of knowledge of outdoor adventure programming, offering insight for experiential educators to have a positive effect on the healthy development of adolescent girls. Furthermore, our study situates body image in the context of health (i.e., exploring participants' associations with healthy living), an area less explored in the experiential learning arena.

Previous studies have recommended conducting further research to understand the immediate and long-term effects of outdoor adventure on body image in adolescent girls. Our study examines such effects and focuses on the influence of outdoor adventure programs on body image in adolescent girls within the broader context of health promotion and development. We aimed to expand our understanding of how adolescent girls believe their outdoor adventure experiences contribute to knowledge and behaviors that promote healthy development and overall well-being.

Review of Literature

There is a rich history of girls' involvement in outdoor recreation and adventure programs in the United States (see McKenney, Budbill, & Roberts, 2008). Since the early 1990s, scholarly and popular literature alike have raised public awareness of the crises facing the healthy development of adolescent girls (e.g., American Association of University Women, 1991; Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2006; Wiseman, 2002; Witmer, Bocarro, & Henderson, 2011). Although recent studies have also elevated concerns about adolescent boys (e.g., Henderson & Bialeschki, 2008; Tyre et al., 2006), the concerns do not negate the difficulties encountered by young girls. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported, for example, that compared to boys, high school girls experienced higher rates of bullying, depression, and attempted suicide and were more likely to describe themselves as overweight and participate in unhealthy weight loss methods (Eaton et al., 2012).

As a primary goal of our study, body image is positioned as one aspect of healthy living. The Girl Scouts' 2006 national study on healthy living found that adolescent girls described health as a lack of illness or refraining from harmful activities (Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2006). Although participants identified healthy living to include proper nutrition, exercise, and positive relationships, they viewed peer approval and appearing "normal" as the more important components of a healthy lifestyle. Girls directly associated being healthy with outer appearances, and 65% of respondents claimed they were "healthy enough for my age" (Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2006, p. 8).

Body Image in Adolescent Girls

A seminal national study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 1991) found that upon entering adolescence, girls experienced decreased appreciation for their bodies, in addition to becoming more self-conscious, self-critical, and anxious. The AAUW re-

ported that both girls and boys experienced a decrease in self-esteem upon adolescence, but that the decline was greater in girls, and physical appearance was of greater importance to adolescent girls than to adolescent boys. Relatedly, Brown and Gilligan (1992) attested that as girls' bodies visually change, they begin to perceive themselves as "objects of beauty . . . [seen] through the gaze of others" (p. 164). In its nationwide study with over 3,100 subjects ($n = 2,060$ girls, 461 boys, and 599 mothers), the Girl Scouts Research Institute (2006) discovered that over one fourth of the adolescent girls studied were dissatisfied with their body weight and that the majority of girls were not practicing healthy eating or physical activity habits.

Several studies have been conducted on the media's negative effect on self-concept in girls and women (e.g., Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005; Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2010; Knauss et al., 2008). For instance, in a recent Girl Scouts study on body image of over 1,000 girls (aged 13–17), 89% blamed the fashion industry for placing immense pressure on adolescent girls to be thin and 31% admitted weight loss attempts by abstaining from eating or famishing their bodies (Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2010).

Outdoor Adventure Programming for Adolescent Girls

In contrast to the occasional harmful messages of mainstream culture, outdoor adventure programming can offer adolescent girls confidence and courage (Whittington & Nixon Mack, 2010), physical competence and strength (Caulkins, White, & Russell, 2006), relational skills (Sammets, 2010), and self-efficacy (Budbill, 2008). Adventure programs and girls' involvement has been explored for 2 decades (McKenney et al., 2008). Although results have indicated benefits of all-girls outdoor adventure programs, few studies have focused on the influence of outdoor adventure programs on body image specifically.

Benefits of outdoor adventure programs for adolescent girls. Ewert, Mitten, and Overholt (2014) reported outdoor adventure programs offer creative opportunities for achieving health benefits associated with the natural environment. Relatedly, Russell and Farnum (2004) found that being in nature and the sense of removal in a wilderness setting was rejuvenating, uplifting, and therapeutic for underserved adolescent girls. Away from their everyday lives and immersed in a wilderness setting for an extended time, adolescent girls had an opportunity to attain physical, social, emotional, and cognitive benefits (Russell & Farnum, 2004).

All-female outdoor adventure programs can provide adolescent girls with increased appreciation for nature and greater awareness of one's surroundings (Caulkins et al., 2006) as well as with the opportunity to challenge socially prescribed notions of beauty and appropriate femininity (Whittington, 2006). Whittington et al. (2011) studied the benefits of three all-girls outdoor adventure programs (i.e., GV, Passages Northwest, Girls Move Mountains). Participants identified the advantages of single-gender programs to include "feelings of safety and comfort, increased connection to others, and freedom from stereotypes" (Whittington et al., 2011, p. 1). Participants attributed their all-girls program to decreased concerns about appearances, on course, and the ability to focus on the experience (Whittington et al., 2011).

Adolescent girls' outdoor adventure programming and body image. Three studies found to date have examined the potential for outdoor adventure programming to influence body image in adolescent girls. First, Edwards-Leeper (2004) examined the psychological benefits of a 2-week wilderness canoe trip, including effect on body image. Results indicated participants experienced increased body acceptance and appreciation for their bodies' abilities, but they offered mixed support for *greater* improvement in body image in relation to the comparison group. Second, in Budbill's (2008) evaluation of a mountain biking program, results showed promotion of positive body image was moderate. That is, of 21 participants, 33% reported feeling more confident about their bodies, compared to a higher percentage of participants supporting other program objectives. Finally, Parsons (2010) conducted a small exploratory study on the influence of an outdoor adventure program on body image by interviewing two former girls,

22 years of age at the time research commenced. Results indicated an immediate benefit of improved body image, but long-term benefits were inconclusive.

Women's Outdoor Adventure Programming and Body Image

It is worth noting that although few studies have intentionally examined the effect of outdoor adventure on body image in *girls*, notable research exists on the influence of outdoor adventure on body image in *women* (e.g., Johnsson, Hoppe, Mitten, & D'Amore, 2013; McDermott, 2004; Mitten & Woodruff, 2010). The experiences of girls and women are different (Culp, 1998), yet related, and an increase in women's outdoor adventure opportunities preceded the rise in girls' outdoor adventure programs offered in the 1990s (McKenney et al., 2008).

McDermott (2004) found that on a single-gender canoe trip women expressed an increased sense of freedom and equality, strength and self-sufficiency, group collaboration, physical competence, and appreciation of their bodies' abilities in an adventure activity. Subsequently, Mitten and Woodruff (2010) explored the effect of short-term outdoor adventure experiences on body image in women over the age of 40, reporting that 72% of the women believed participation in outdoor adventure positively influenced self-perceptions of their bodies' effectiveness and attractiveness. These studies with women provided additional inspiration leading toward the goal of examining the influence of outdoor adventure on body image in adolescent girls.

Method

The purpose of this retrospective study was to explore the effects of GV's outdoor adventure programs on body image in adolescent girls. Two central questions guided this research: (1) *What influence do GV programs have on body image in adolescent girls?* (2) *How do former GV participants define "healthy living" for themselves?*

A phenomenological inquiry was employed, a "strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study" (Creswell, 2009, p. 231). For present use, Girls Advisory Board members (i.e., GV alumnae participating in a postcourse leadership development program) were asked to reflect on their course and assess *how their outdoor adventure experiences influenced their body image* (i.e., the "phenomenon"). This approach depicts less concern about the accuracy of details with more focus on exploring the truth according to the participants' experiences, considering their own words as factual for them (van Manen, 1999).

Research Participants

Participants were recruited from GV, a nonprofit organization in San Francisco that "empower[s] adolescent girls to develop and express their strengths" through outdoor adventure activities (GirlVentures, 2015a, para. 1). Serving girls in sixth to 12th grades, GV has provided outdoor adventure programs for over 4,000 youth in the Bay Area since 1997 (GirlVentures, 2015a). Summer programs include 1- to 2-week expedition-style courses featuring backpacking, rock climbing, and/or sea kayaking (GirlVentures, 2015d). School-year programs include a weekly rock climbing program (GirlVentures, 2015c) and a monthly leadership development and mentorship program for alumnae, the Girls Advisory Board (GirlVentures, 2015b).

All members of the 2011–2012 Girls Advisory Board (GAB), comprising 17 high school-aged GV alumnae, were invited to participate. All GAB members are required to have completed at least one multiday GV program prior to joining the GAB. Membership involves participating in monthly meetings and an overnight retreat, planning and leading an activity with their peers, promoting GV at an outreach event, and organizing an annual walking/hiking fund-raiser to provide scholarships for new GV participants. Alumnae serve on the GAB for a minimum of 1 school year, beginning as early as ninth grade with the option of continued involvement through 12th grade (GirlVentures, 2015b).

The GAB is a purposive sample of the 4,000 GV alumnae. All GV program graduates may apply to join the GAB; however, membership generally involves the following criteria: (a) nominated by instructors for demonstrating leadership skills and dedication to the mission of the organization, (b) invited to apply by the GAB advisor (e.g., GV director of programs and outreach), and (c) selected through an interview process with the GAB advisor and current GAB members. Because the GAB is an integral part of the GV leadership development model, GAB members reflect the potential for all GV participants to realize the full benefits of the organization by remaining involved in GV beyond their outdoor adventure experience. Therefore, our study explored the potential for GV programs to influence body image in adolescent girls through the retrospective experiences of these GV alumnae who continued to develop their personal strengths through ongoing adult mentorship and peer support. The 2011–2012 GAB was intentionally selected because participants were still in adolescence, thereby supporting the goal of understanding the influence of outdoor adventure on body image during that stage of their lives.

Thirteen of the 17 GAB members agreed to participate. Regarding age, grade, and race of the GV alumnae who participated, the majority were juniors in high school and predominantly White, with some racial diversity (see Table 1). Participants were between 11 and 14 years old when they attended their first GV program and ranged from age 13–16 at the time research commenced. By nature of GAB membership requiring girls to be of high school age, and the majority of GV programs geared toward girls aged 11 to 14, participants completed their last course up to 3 years prior to our study. Participants had varying levels of experience with GV, including GAB membership duration and the number and types of courses attended.

Data Collection

Data were collected in fall 2011, first through a written questionnaire developed based on the literature as well as on an external review by three subject matter experts for purposes of face validity. All 13 participants completed the questionnaire that included open- and closed-ended questions. Items consisted of personal perception of the influence of their former GV program on their body image (e.g., what aspect and/or activity, how, why); understanding of health; and how healthy living related to their own lives, body image, and experiences in a GV program. The influence of the GV program on participants' body image was explored at the time of course as well as at the time of study. The Girls Scouts Research Institute's (2010) national body image survey and Budbill's (2008) camp surveys inspired body image questions. The Girls Scouts Research Institute's (2006) national study on healthy living inspired questions related to healthy living.

Two examples of the open-ended questions were, "What specific activities did you participate in on your first course that may have influenced how you felt about your body, at that time?" and "What is your definition of 'health'?" Closed-ended questions consisted of scales, including forced choice and "Check all that apply." In one question, participants were asked to rate a series of statements about their body on a Likert-type scale of *never*, *sometimes*, *most of the time*, and *all of the time*, including the following sample items: "I like my body," "My body is strong," and "My body is beautiful." In another question, girls were asked how they would describe their lifestyle in terms of their health with four items to choose from: "My lifestyle is" (a) *not that healthy and I wish it were healthier*, (b) *not that healthy but I'm not worried about it*, (c) *very healthy*, and/or (d) *healthy enough for my age*.

Second, after completing the questionnaire, participants were divided into two focus groups, each assigned by age cohort (i.e., ages 13–15 and 15–16), to further explore the influence of their GV course on body image and their opinions about healthy living. All participants previously completed at least one GV program, so a focus group allowed them to share their course experiences in a format that inspired others' responses and reflective insights. One of the 13 girls who completed the questionnaire was unable to participate in her focus group.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

Characteristic	N	%
Age		
13	1	8
14	1	8
15	6	46
16	5	38
Grade		
9	2	15
10	4	31
11	7	54
Racial and Ethnic Background ^a		
Asian	2	15
Chinese (1)		
Filipino, Native American, Hawaiian (1) ^b		
Mixed: Chinese, White (1)	1	8
White/Caucasian	10	77
GAB Experience		
1 st year member	4	31
2nd year member	5	38
3 rd year member	4	31
Participation in GV Courses (#)		
One course	3	23
Two courses	3	23
Three courses	5	39
Four courses	2	15
Years Since First Course		
Less than 1 year	1	8
1 year	2	15
2 years	4	31
3 years	3	23
4 years	2	15
5 years	1	8
Years Since Last Course		
Less than 1 year	8	62
2 years	4	31
3 years	1	8
Participation in GV Courses (Programs) ^c		
Project Courage (7 th –8 th grade)	9	69
Transitions (9th grade)	10	77
On the Rise (10 th –11 th grade GV alumnae)	5	38
Girls Climb On (6 th –9 th grade)	6	46

Note. Research participants, $n = 13$. Greatest frequencies shown in **bold**. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number and therefore do not consistently total 100%. Percentages indicate the proportion of participants that attended each program.

^aParticipants who did not identify as White/Caucasian were considered students of color ($n = 3$, 23%). ^bParticipant identified as Asian. ^cParticipants checked all courses that applied, resulting in a total (N) greater than 13.

Participants' questionnaire responses informed their focus group responses. The lead researcher modified the list of focus group questions and ordered the questions by importance, by acquiring preliminary information about participants' body image and experiences in GV programs through the questionnaire. Situating body image in the context of healthy living, focus group questions about healthy living on a GV course were prioritized and specified in focus groups, such as "Was 'healthy living' part of your GV course?" and "Did healthy living on your course include physical health?" Other sample focus group questions included (a) "Are girls 'supposed' to look a certain way, or is it okay for girls to look any way they want?" (b) "What influences your body image?" and (c) "Was there ever a time on course when you felt particularly present, 'in your body'? What were you doing? What was happening around you? Were you conscious about the way you looked? Or did you *lose* consciousness about how you looked?"

Data Analysis

Open-ended questionnaire responses were first compared among participants; we then used HyperRESEARCH to analyze open-ended questionnaire items and focus group transcripts together for similarities and differences. Responses to closed-ended questionnaire items were then manually entered into Survey Monkey to provide frequencies. After combining and incorporating codes in HyperRESEARCH and Microsoft Word, we used Microsoft Excel to analyze emergent themes for the number of participants, quantify instances supporting each code, and assess the presence of each theme in the two modes of data collection including three sources (i.e., one questionnaire and two focus groups).

The organization of themes into primary and secondary categories was based on the number of participants ($n = 13$), number of instances, and presence in focus groups and the questionnaire. This organizational method has been used in previous studies. For example, Prince (2008) used phenomenological inquiry and focus groups to examine the experience of group exercise in 12 female college students. Themes were classified into "major" and "minor" categories, based on the prevalence of responses and the presence of themes in the three focus groups and participant worksheets (Prince, 2008).

Using member checking to increase validity, the lead researcher e-mailed emerging themes to participants after each focus group interview, requesting confirmation or clarification of themes within 1 week. After data from all questionnaires and focus groups were compared and coded into comprehensive themes, participants were invited to offer additional confirmation or clarification of themes during a regular monthly GAB meeting, 3 months following the second focus group. Nine of the 13 participants were present for the member check event, which included a discussion about key themes, followed by a creative expression activity allowing participants to paint their themes on a banner.

Role of the Researcher

The lead researcher was connected to GV, including mentoring with the GAB, and had known some of the participants for over 1 year at the time this study commenced. This association with the GAB assisted the researcher in creating a familiar, relaxed environment for conducting focus group interviews and helping respondents to feel comfortable voicing honest opinions. Additionally, the researcher had not previously instructed a summer course for GV, so participants were able to speak more candidly about their experience than if interviewed by a former instructor.

The researcher could have brought a bias believing in the potential for outdoor adventure programming to have a positive effect on adolescent girls. Although known as a challenge among qualitative studies, feminist theory widely recognizes that "research always reflects the perspectives, ideals, and biases of the researcher" (Way, 1998, p. 13). Therefore, the researcher reflected upon these acknowledged biases and their possible effects throughout data collection and analy-

sis, ensuring all data collection and analytical procedures followed proper protocols as verified by a subject matter expert. Additionally, Guba and Lincoln consider member checks (previously mentioned) as the “single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility” (as cited in Shenton, 2004, p. 64). This, along with overall findings emerging from the data and not the researcher’s personal tendencies or values, helped to establish trustworthiness.

Results

Results include a distinction between primary and secondary themes. Primary and secondary themes that emerged are discussed according to the two central research questions as previously noted: (1) *What influence do GV programs have on body image in adolescent girls?* and (2) *How do former GV participants define “healthy living” for themselves?*

Our study intended to explore prior experiences of adolescent girls in their *first* GV course, but participants referenced multiple courses in the questionnaire and the focus groups. Participants distinguished between individual programs to an extent, but the majority of comments referenced their general “course” experience (i.e., participants discussed their overall experience from multiple GV courses, rather than referring to a specific GV program). Consequently, open coding focused on the data to identify concepts and categories regarding participants’ general experience in their GV programs, and development of primary and secondary themes included references to all prior courses.

Primary and Secondary Themes Distinction

Through the coding process, 17 primary themes and 10 secondary themes emerged. *Primary themes* included content from nine to 13 participants, 15–86 instances, and presence in both focus groups and the questionnaire. *Secondary themes* were operationalized as themes supported by five to eight participants, seven to 20 instances, and themes found in both focus groups but not necessarily the questionnaire. Themes were combined further, and the 10 most relevant themes (i.e., most directly related to both research questions) will be discussed. Table 2 presents the 10 themes: five related to the first research question and five to the second. Themes are illustrated by sample participant comments, and all analyses include pseudonyms for confidentiality.

Table 2
Ten Most Relevant Themes Illustrated by Participant Comments

Theme	Sample response
Research Question 1: What influence do GV programs have on body image in adolescents?	
1. GV positively influenced body image at the time of course	My course influenced my physical appearance in a positive way, because...we were told about how everyone [was] beautiful.
2. GV positively influenced body image at the time of study	Today, I love my body...I think that my first GV course may [still] influence how I feel about my body.
3. Instructors positively influenced body image	[The instructors] pushed getting rid of our ideas that our bodies should look like those that we see in the media . . . [and that] it didn’t matter what size you were as long as you were healthy.
4. Other girls on course positively influenced body image	The girls on that course were so loving towards me all the time and that’s what made me feel beautiful.
5. Nature positively influenced body image	Nature is beautiful and we are natural beings. Therefore, I am beautiful because I saw that nature was beautiful.

Table 2 (cont.)

Theme	Sample response
Research Question 2: How do former GV participants define "healthy living" for them?	
6. Healthy living includes physical health	My definition of health is being in good shape.
7. Healthy living includes relationship with self	A healthy lifestyle [is] taking care of yourself...being aware of the people around you, but not forgetting who you are and not forgetting that you are important, as well.
8. Healthy living includes relationships with others	A healthy relationship is when you...[know] what you have to say about something will be accepted.
9. Healthy living includes emotional health	Health is...how resilient and happy someone is.
10. Healthy living includes holistic health	Health is your overall state of being.

Influence of GV programs on body image. Participants described their GV program as positively influencing their body image at the time of course and continuing to influence their body image positively at the time of study. Specifically, positive influences on body image included instructors, other girls on course, and nature.

GV positively influenced body image at the time of course. All 13 participants indicated that their GV program positively influenced their feelings about their physical appearance at the time of course (i.e., during and immediately after their course). Belina, for example, shared, "When I was 12 and went on [course], I realized we are all the same. We all have noses and we all have butts. For the first time in my life, I was proud of the way I looked."

GV positively influenced body image at the time of study. Most participants ($n = 9$) credited their GV program as continuing to have a positive influence on their body image at the time of study. Supporting this theme, Belina described her appearance as "gorgeous . . . [curvy] and powerful and it's the perfect reflection of what's inside of me. My first GV course still influences how I look at . . . my body in the mirror." Three of these nine participants reported struggling with negative perceptions about their appearance, but clarified that their GV program still positively affected their body image. Two participants conveyed that although their GV program had positively influenced their body image at the time of course, they did *not* have a positive body image at the time of study and their GV program no longer influenced their feelings about their appearance. Figure 1 illustrates participants' varying responses to how their GV course still influenced their body image at the time of study.

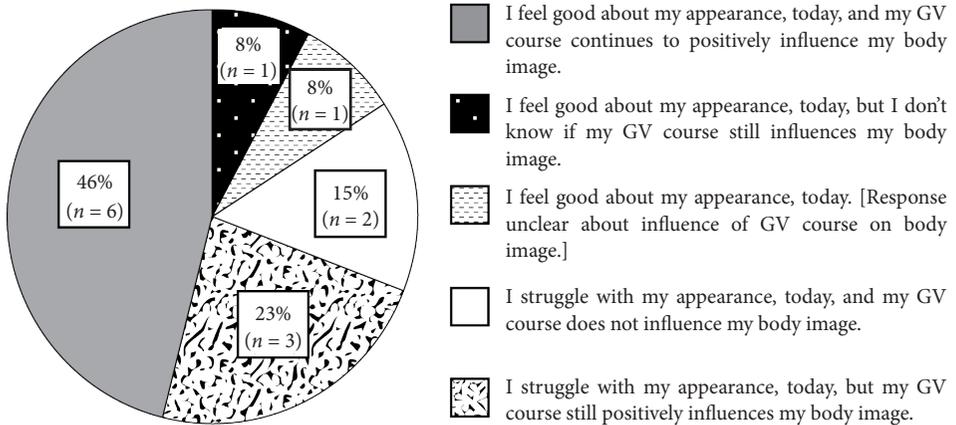


Figure 1. Perceived influence of GV course on body image at time of study. Results illustrate how participants felt about their appearance at the time of study and the influence their GV course had on their body image at the time of study. Participants were asked about these ideas in both the questionnaire and focus groups; however, some responses were clearer in one form of data collection versus another. Subsequently, statements shown are not exact statements from the questionnaire or focus groups, but rather integrated results from both forms of data collection.

Instructors positively influenced body image. The effect of instructors on body image emerged as a prominent theme; 12 of the 13 participants referenced their instructors as facilitating healthy discussions about body image or creating an environment that promoted positive body image. Participants referred to their instructors as role models, described by Venus as “muscular and strong, normal women...not [size double-zero] and [disproportionate] in boob-body size . . . [They] are among some of the most beautiful women I have met, and their utter confidence in their looks helped me to discover my own self-beauty.”

Other girls on course positively influenced body image. Participants (n = 7) described relationships with other girls in their GV program as positively influencing their body image. Participants commonly mentioned not judging or being judged for appearances because of their shared experiences with other girls on course. Tulsi, for instance, stated:

[My course] helped me . . . [to not be] so self-conscious [about] what I looked like during that moment in time, since everyone else on course [was] in the same conditions as me, out in nature where no bathrooms were accessible with mirrors.

Nature positively influenced body image. Participant comments were often dual-coded for the influence of other girls on course and the influence of nature on body image:

The outdoor setting was good because the high mountains and hard hikes forced us to stop worrying about how we looked. At that time we were all equals and there was no pressure to attempt to make efforts at “looking good.” The outdoor setting allowed us to make jokes about how bad we smelled . . . because we were all in the same boat. (Skye)

The positive influence of nature on body image was identified as a primary theme, with 12 of the 13 participants describing nature as positively influencing their body image on course.

GV Participants Defining “Healthy Living”

All 13 participants claimed that body image is part of healthy living. Twelve agreed that most adolescent girls struggle with body image and that positive body image is *very important* to living a healthy life. Venus shared, “I think if you’re living healthy . . . you would probably have a positive body image because you’d be happy with who you were.” Participants further described healthy living to include physical health, relationship with self, relationships with others, emotional health, and holistic health.

Healthy living includes physical health. All participants defined healthy living as including physical health. The majority of related comments involved diet and exercise. Participants indicated that “eating a healthy, balanced diet” was either *very important* ($n = 7$) or *somewhat important* ($n = 6$) to healthy living and agreed that it was either *very important* ($n = 9$) or *somewhat important* ($n = 4$) to “exercise . . . at least three times a week.”

Healthy living includes relationship with self. In defining healthy living, all participants supported the emergent theme of the relationship with self, including self-esteem, autonomy, and self-awareness. Referencing their course, participants discussed gaining knowledge about feminine hygiene, nutrition, and self-care. Twelve of the 13 participants agreed with the statement, “My first GV course helped me feel more confident about what my body can do.”

Some participants ($n = 5$) explicitly described how *their* perceptions of *others’* bodies changed on course, which was categorized under relationship with self. Trillium explained, “I remember looking at one of our . . . instructors . . . [who was] swimming or something . . . Maybe [she] didn’t have the . . . perfectest [*sic*] body, but . . . she was a really cool . . . woman and it didn’t matter . . . [I realized] everyone has a different body type.”

Healthy living includes relationships with others. All 13 participants considered relationships with others as part of healthy living. Ten participants conveyed “being accepted by peers” was either *very important* ($n = 2$) or *somewhat important* ($n = 8$) to healthy living. On course, participants described feeling accepted, comfortable, and supported, identifying a sense of closeness, trust, and “safe space” with the other girls in their program: “I saw people screaming and dancing and falling on the ground, because they were so proud of themselves, and I saw people . . . melt . . . and it’s just so powerful . . . because you are so close, because [of] . . . the things you’ve gone through together (Belina).”

Healthy living includes emotional health. Most participants ($n = 10$) described healthy living as encompassing emotional health, including the presence of positive emotions and absence of negative emotions. Skye, for example, claimed, “Emotional health is how one feels about themselves and their world. Much of health is defined by people’s attitude and mindset to their situation.” Referencing their course experience, participants ($n = 7$) described their GV program as cultivating positive feelings and not being stressful.

Healthy living includes holistic health. Finally, holistic explanations of health emerged as a theme. Participants ($n = 11$) described health as *in body and in mind*. Referencing physical and relational aspects, health was described as a “balance between a nutritious, healthy diet [and] exercise, but also a balance between time alone and time spent with friends” (Belina). Highlighting the importance of physical health and time in nature, Aranka defined health as “eating a balanced, nutritious, regular diet, leading an active lifestyle that includes walking and running, and spending lots of time [outdoors].”

Discussion

Our retrospective exploratory study examined the influence of outdoor adventure on body image as self-reported by adolescent girls. The potential for GV programs to have a positive effect on body image in course participants was investigated by conducting research with a small cohort of GAB members. What might be the greatest opportunity for GV to have a positive

influence on body image was explored by gathering descriptive data from alumnae in the organization's youth leadership development program. This section offers highlights of key findings regarding body image and healthy living, implications for practice, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

GV Programs and Body Image

All participants indicated their body image was positively affected during and immediately after their course, and most claimed that their body image was still positively affected by their course at the time of study. The girls identified positive influences on body image to include instructors, other girls on course, and nature. GV alumnae reporting that their course had immediate positive effects on body image corroborates with previous research (see Edwards-Leeper, 2004; Parsons, 2010; Whittington & Nixon Mack, 2010). One possible reason fewer participants stated their body image was still positively influenced by their GV program up to 3 years post-course is that the benefits of their course may have decreased over time and the negative effects of media and social pressures potentially increased as they aged.

Participants in our study recognized instructors as modeling positive body image through their own self-confidence and sense of comfort with their bodies. Another factor might have been the strenuous nature of the outdoor adventure course, possibly influencing participants to make connections between their instructors' physical strengths and abilities and their body image. Participants' perceptions of their instructors' body image may have been influenced by observing what their instructors could physically *do*, for example. Respectively, Mitten and Woodruff (2010) and Johnsson et al. (2013) found that body image is linked to physical effectiveness in previous research with women in outdoor programs. Although no previous studies were found to date that specifically explored the effect of outdoor adventure instructors on body image, research exists on the influence of instructors on participant experience. Rodriguez and Roberts (2005), for instance, reported that in an adolescent outdoor education program with the Student Conservation Association, the effectiveness of the course leader was more influential on participant experience than was the participant's gender or ethnicity.

GV Participants and "Healthy Living"

In regard to how participants defined "healthy living" for themselves, GV alumnae included physical health (i.e., primarily diet and exercise), relationship with self, relationships with others, emotional health, and holistic health in their descriptions. These definitions were consistent with descriptions of health offered by adolescent girls in the Girl Scouts Research Institute's (2006) study. The finding of GV alumnae describing health as holistic (e.g., in body and in mind) is also supported by Üstün and Jakob's (2005) definition of health as stated in the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* as "a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (para. 3).

A distinction between our study and the Girl Scouts' research involves the concept of "normal." As long as girls in the Girl Scouts Research Institute's (2006) study perceived themselves as "normal," they believed they had healthy lifestyles, regardless of factors such as diet and exercise (p. 22). GV alumnae did not specifically discuss health in terms of being "normal." However, like the participants in the Girl Scouts Research Institute's (2006) study, over half the participants in our study agreed with the statement, "My lifestyle is healthy enough for my age." This suggests a sense of normalcy as well as that healthy lifestyle decisions may not be of immediate concern. Additionally, relationship with self is a primary theme in our study, and GV alumnae described having a healthy relationship with self on course. Important to note is that no other studies indicated participants gained appreciation for different body types while on an outdoor adventure course. This finding, categorized under relationship with self, is a unique contribution to the body of knowledge on this subject.

Implications for Practice

Exploring the influence of outdoor adventure programs on body image in adolescent girls can provide valuable program, leadership training, and evaluation suggestions for GV. Primary and secondary themes and subsequent recommendations have the potential to offer insight for other outdoor recreation professionals, particularly girls' outdoor adventure practitioners. Implications briefly discussed are twofold: (a) body image and healthy living in participants and (b) influence of instructors on body image.

Body image and healthy living. All participants claimed their GV program positively influenced their body image during and directly following their course, and most claimed their body image was still positively influenced at the time of study. Two participants recalled a specific activity on course that involved looking at pictures of women in popular magazines and discussing prescribed beauty norms. GV might consider ensuring staff trainings include effective techniques for promoting positive body image on course and adding an item about body image to one of the postcourse surveys, such as "How do you think your course may have influenced how you feel about your appearance?" Also, GV participants considered proper nutrition to be an important aspect of three key factors: relating to their personal health, as a vital part of their course experience, and having a positive effect on their body image. GV might consider adopting an increased programmatic focus on healthy eating and training instructors to present dietetic guidelines for girls.

Influence of instructors on body image. The influence of instructors on body image surfaced as one of the strongest primary themes. To further assess this effect, GV could add an open-ended question to future participant evaluations, such as "How do you think your instructors may have influenced how you feel about your appearance?" It may also be worthwhile for GV to consider adopting Edwards-Leeper's (2004) recommendation to have instructors complete a brief written evaluation, after the course, examining how they promoted positive body image as well as healthy eating; this could include structured activities and living by example (e.g., modeling).

Limitations

Our study included a purposeful sample of adolescent girls, conducted with the 2011–2012 GAB. The phenomenon of how an outdoor adventure experience may influence body image was not explored in all GV alumnae or in girls from other outdoor adventure programs. Additionally, a small sample of GAB members limited the number of voices heard. Although the intention is for the GAB to represent GV alumnae, the racial diversity of the 2011–2012 GAB (i.e., 36% girls of color) did not reflect the diversity of all GV alumnae (i.e., 59% girls of color). GAB composition is determined by GV (i.e., girls are selected by the GAB advisor and returning GAB members), so equal representation of participants in our study (e.g., race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation) was a limitation. Our findings do not explore experiences of adolescent girls regarding racial and ethnic differences, as only three GAB members who chose to participate were students of color.

Recommendations for Future Research

The long-term effects of outdoor adventure programs on body image in adolescent girls are ripe for exploration. Subsequently, all GV summer program participants could be assessed through pre- and postcourse surveys. A longitudinal study could assess body image before participants' first course, immediately after their first course, and periodically over the next 3 to 5 years. Our study focused on qualitative assessment, but a longitudinal study could quantitatively examine participants' body image and the influence their outdoor course had on their body image, as related literature on this subject is particularly lacking in quantitative research. Such a study could also examine potential challenges to maintaining a positive body image after the

course (e.g., increased exposure to negative media messages as participants age).

Analyses of this data did not include consideration for racial and ethnic diversity, because only three of the 13 participants were girls of color. It is also important to acknowledge that three of the four GAB members who chose not to participate were girls of color. This limitation of minimal participation by girls of color begs the need for future research on body image to include the perspectives of racially diverse participants. All girls of color should be invited to participate in the same focus group to maintain homogeneity, and a woman of color should cofacilitate to increase involvement.

Future research could also explore postcourse the influence of continued involvement in an outdoor adventure organization on body image and, in the case of our study, the influence of a youth leadership development program on girls within that organization. Additionally, further research is needed on the body image benefits achieved through girls' outdoor adventure courses in comparison to those gained in other summer programs for adolescent girls. Therefore, future research might compare body image in adolescent girls between four populations: (a) outdoor adventure participants (e.g., girls on a GV course), (b) participants in other summer programs (e.g., girls in a summer day camp), (c) outdoor adventure alumnae in a leadership development program within their organization (e.g., GAB members), and (d) alumnae from other summer programs on a leadership team within their organization (e.g., summer day camp planning team). Such study would allow comparison between the effect of *outdoor adventure* programs on body image and the influence of continued involvement in an organization's *leadership development program* on body image. The same study could also further explore the influence of other girls on body image in relation to the natural environment, comparing responses from an outdoor adventure program to those from a summer program not based in nature.

GV alumnae claimed their instructors were positive role models; hence, the influence of instructors' body image on course participants could be further explored, along with the influence of instructors' physique and race on participants' body image. The influence of outdoor adventure instructors on body image, such as those at GV, could be compared to the influence of women leaders in other all-girls programs.

Future studies could also include an analysis of the body image curriculum presented to instructors at staff training, application of curriculum on course, and instructor perceptions of participant outcomes. Finally, further research could explore the concept of intentionality in promoting positive body image on course. That is, is it enough for instructors to act as role models, or is it necessary for instructors to facilitate specific activities and discussions about body image with adolescent girls?

Conclusions

Our exploratory study offers insight into the influence GV courses have on body image in adolescent girls. We examined the greatest potential for GV programs to have a positive effect on body image by conducting research with a small group of GAB members, highly motivated GV alumnae. Using phenomenological inquiry in this study, we focused on the participants' own words to lift out their unique experience as adolescent girls.

The first of two central research questions was, *what influence do GV programs have on body image in adolescent girls?* Through questionnaire and focus group inquiries, participants indicated their body image was positively affected during and immediately after their course, and most claimed that their body image was still positively affected by their course at the time of study. Positive influences included instructors, other girls on course, and nature. The second central research question was, *how do former GV participants define "healthy living" for themselves?* GV alumnae indicated that healthy living involved positive body image, physical health, relationship with self, relationships with others, emotional health, and holistic health.

Program, leadership training, and evaluation recommendations have been suggested to GV and may be of interest to other outdoor adventure programs as a whole. One of the strongest themes of particular interest is the influence of *instructors* on participants' body image and, more broadly, healthy living. Based on these current findings, it is recommended that instructors are trained to (a) facilitate intentional course activities to promote positive body image and healthy living (e.g., eating healthy foods) and (b) consider their influence as a role model and how *their* projected body image, as an instructor, has the potential to influence the body image of their participants.

Outdoor adventure offers the opportunity to challenge traditional beauty norms, and instructors can assist in breaking down barriers related to positive body image by serving as role models and facilitating activities and discussions that promote healthy living. Participation among adolescent girls can contribute to healthier communities with self-confident young women, providing positive directions for a brighter future.

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