Performance or appearance? Young female sport participants’ body negotiations

Carolina Lunde *, Kristina Holmqvist Gattario

Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 10 July 2016
Received in revised form 1 March 2017
Accepted 1 March 2017

Keywords:
Young women
Sport participation
Body image
Thematic analysis focus groups

A B S T R A C T

The aim of this qualitative study was to examine young female sport participants’ experiences and thoughts in terms of sport, their bodies, and social appearance norms. Six focus groups with female sport participants (N = 25) from Sweden were conducted. Participants raised many positive experiences in relation to their sport participation, but they also witnessed a conflict in the intersection between the culture within their sport (emphasizing physical performance) and the culture outside their sport (emphasizing physical appearance). Through thematic analysis, four themes illustrating the balancing act between these two cultures were formed: (a) the performing body versus the objectified body, (b) food as fuel versus source of shame, (c) appreciation of body type diversity versus appearance prejudice, and (d) empowerment and agency versus disempowerment and restraints. The findings of this study indicate that young women who engage in sport have to face complex, ambiguous, and restricting norms and notions.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Sport participation has positive effects on individuals’ physical as well as mental health (Bailey, Wellard, & Dismore, 2005). For adolescents and young adults, who are in the midst of several wide-ranging developmental changes, the sport environment may not only provide a context of joy and social engagement, but also an opportunity to enhance and refine physical skills (e.g., strength, coordination; Greenleaf, Boyer, & Petrie, 2009) and to develop a sense of embodiment, which is a feeling of being grounded in the body whereby internal experiences are honored via maintaining body awareness and responsiveness, focusing on body functionality and agency, and inhabiting the body as a subjective rather than objectified site (Piran, 2015; Piran & Teall, 2012). For girls and young women in Western cultures, who are socialized into viewing their bodies as objects (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), it has been suggested that the sport environment may foster a more positive body image by encouraging them to appreciate their bodies for their functionality rather than their appearance (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter, & Reel, 2009; Slater & Tiggemann, 2012). Thus, it can be inferred that girls’ and young women’s engagement in sport may be associated with positive long-term effects for health and well-being.

Body image is usually defined as individuals’ attitudes toward and self-perceptions of their bodies and is considered to be a multidimensional construct (Cash, Melnyk, & Hrbosky, 2004). While much of the research on body image to date has focused on attitudes toward and self-perceptions of the aesthetic (or appearance) qualities of the body, the construct also encompasses attitudes toward and self-perceptions of the functional aspects of the body. Abbott and Barber (2011) argued that one reason it is beneficial for young women to use their bodies within the context of sport is that sport facilitates the development of an identity that integrates both aesthetic and functional views of the body. Indeed, recent work shows that focusing on body functionality may promote body appreciation (Alleva, Veldhuis, & Martijn, 2016), which are important components of positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Despite these assumptions, only a few studies have focused on investigating young women’s sport participation and body image (e.g., Abbott & Barber, 2011; Crissey & Honea, 2006; de Bruin, Woertman, Bakker, & Oudejans, 2009; Kong & Harris, 2015; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011, 2012).

Consistent with the idea that sport participation may foster young women’s body appreciation, Abbott and Barber (2011) found that adolescent girls (13–18 years of age) who participated in sports
had a more functional body image and were more satisfied with the functional aspects of their bodies compared to girls who did not engage in sport. However, there is also evidence that the relationship between young women's sport participation and different aspects of body image may depend on sport type. Researchers have shown that participation in sports that are aesthetic, leanness-focused, or weight-dependent (e.g., gymnastics, figure skating, long-distance running) may be associated with more body image disturbances (Crissey & Honea, 2006; Kong & Harris, 2015). Crissey and Honea (2006), for example, examined the relationship between sport participation and perceptions of body size and weight loss strategies in a large sample (N = 7214) of adolescent girls (12–18 years of age). They found that those who participated in more aesthetically-related sports (e.g., cheerleading/dance, volleyball, tennis, and swimming) were more likely to report feeling overweight and attempting to lose weight compared to girls who did not practice sports. Likewise, time spent on aesthetic activities such as ballet and gymnastics was found to be positively related to adolescent girls' (12–16 years of age) disordered eating symptomatology (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Other evidence suggests that competition level (Kong & Harris, 2015) and motives for sport participation (de Bruin et al., 2009) may play a role in body image disturbances, with elite level participation and weight-related exercise motives being linked to stronger body image concerns.

Altogether, the above findings indicate that young women’s participation in sports may protect them against negative views of their bodies and problematic eating behaviors, but it may also reinforce such negative thoughts and behaviors. Mosewich, Vangool, Kowalski, and McHugh (2009) argued that one way to understand this discrepancy is to use qualitative methods, enabling young women to express their own experiences and thoughts about the sport environment. To date, only two qualitative studies have investigated adolescent girls’ or young women’s experiences of body image-related issues in sport (Mosewich et al., 2009; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). Slater and Tiggemann (2010) did not primarily investigate female sport participants, but conducted focus group interviews with adolescent girls aged 13–15 years old in order to examine reasons for girls’ withdrawal from participation in sports. Indeed, statistics show that adolescents in different parts of the world are becoming less engaged in organized sports (Sports and Fitness Industry Association, 2015), and this decline is particularly noticeable among girls (Swedish Center for Sports Research, 2013). Slater and Tiggemann identified many possible reasons for girls’ withdrawal from sport. These were, for instance, lost interest, time constraints, poor team relationships, prioritizing of schoolwork, and crossing traditional gender boundaries when playing sport. Interestingly, the participants also raised the issue of body image since sport participation often implied wearing uniforms that were “uncool,” too revealing, or unflattering for one’s body size.

The second qualitative study is Mosewich et al.’s (2009) case studies with eight young female sports participants in track and field, focusing on the “meanings of muscularity” in this group. Participants taking part in the study communicated that they were receiving mixed messages about muscularity; for example, they reported that the muscular physique needed to excel in sport was challenged by the thin societal appearance ideal. Participants also experienced a conflict between muscularity and notions about femininity, and what a feminine body ought to look like. As a result, the eight women in Mosewich et al.’s study felt that they constantly needed to work on their body image and self-acceptance. These findings are consistent with what has been communicated by adult female athletes in qualitative studies (George, 2005; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Liechty, Svinson, Willfong, & Evans, 2015; Russell, 2004). For instance, Russell (2004) interviewed female rugby players, cricketers, and netballers and reported that the women’s body satisfaction was dependent on whether they were inside or outside their sport milieu. While they felt positive towards their bodies because of their physical functions when they were practicing their sport, they had several concerns about their bodies when placed in other social environments.

In sum, very little research from the viewpoints of young female sport participants themselves has been done. Mosewich et al.’s (2009) study had a rather narrow focus on muscularity among track and field athletes. Clearly, more knowledge is needed to further the understanding of young women’s experiences within the sport environment. Considering recent evidence pointing towards an overall decline in young women’s sport participation (Sports and Fitness Industry Association, 2015), and high dropout rates among adolescent girls (Swedish Center for Sports Research, 2013), it is especially urgent and relevant to interview adolescent and young adult women. By using qualitative methods, hence giving voice to young female sport participants’ own experiences, it is possible to learn more about the specific circumstances affecting young female athletes’ perceptions of their bodies. In turn, we may gain valuable insights into how to make the sport context a positive arena for young women’s body image.

Thus, the overall aim of this qualitative study was to examine young female sport participants’ experiences and thoughts in terms of their sports, their bodies, and social appearance norms. In relation to previous studies discussed above, the aim was extended to examine the shared experiences of young female sport participants (thus moving beyond focusing on one specific sport or one specific individual within a sport). To do this, we conducted focus group interviews with late adolescent and young adult female sport participants practicing three of the most popular sports (equestrian sport, soccer, and swimming) among young women in Sweden (The Swedish Sport Confederation, 2016).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from a follow-up research project called TJEJ: ISKT (approximate translation: girls, sport, and exercise, self- and body image), led by the first author. The project’s aim was to study body image, sport, and exercise participation among girls and young adult women (including those who engage in sport and those who do not). In all, 25 adolescent and young adult women (aged between 15 and 20 years, \(M_{\text{age}} = 18.20, SD = 1.53\)), who at the first wave of the research project reported participating in equestrian sports, soccer, or swimming at least weekly, were interviewed in focus groups. A total of six focus groups were conducted (two groups of young women in equestrian sports, \(n = 10\); two groups of young women in soccer, \(n = 7\); and two groups of young women in swimming, \(n = 8\)). We chose to conduct sport-specific focus groups in order to make the young women feel as comfortable as possible, and to engage in a discussion of their shared experiences within their sport (as opposed to the possible different experiences across sports).

All participants were born in Sweden, and had several years of experience in their respective sport. As there are different conditions for competing in different sports, the level of sport varied among the participants. Considering this issue, we differed between recreational (engaging in sport merely for fun), competitive (engaging in sport for performance, and participating in various forms of competition), and elite (engaging in top performance sport) levels of competition. Participants were asked to report their level of sport (along with name, age, and sport type) on a separate response sheet before the focus group interview started. All participants reported having been engaged in their sport at least at a competitive level,
دریافت فوری متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات