

A2 Psychology

Read the following article, which has been reproduced from the Guardian, then carry out the activities at the end (overleaf)

Celebrities distort girls' search for ideal shape

Survey of teenagers reveals discontent with personal appearance and a preoccupation with the desire to acquire the perfect form

Laura Barton

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Just 8% of teenage girls in Britain deem themselves to be happy with their body, according to a body image survey commissioned by a teen magazine.

A further 68% believe their faces to be unattractive, and their lives are preoccupied by the desire to acquire a "perfect" celebrity body.

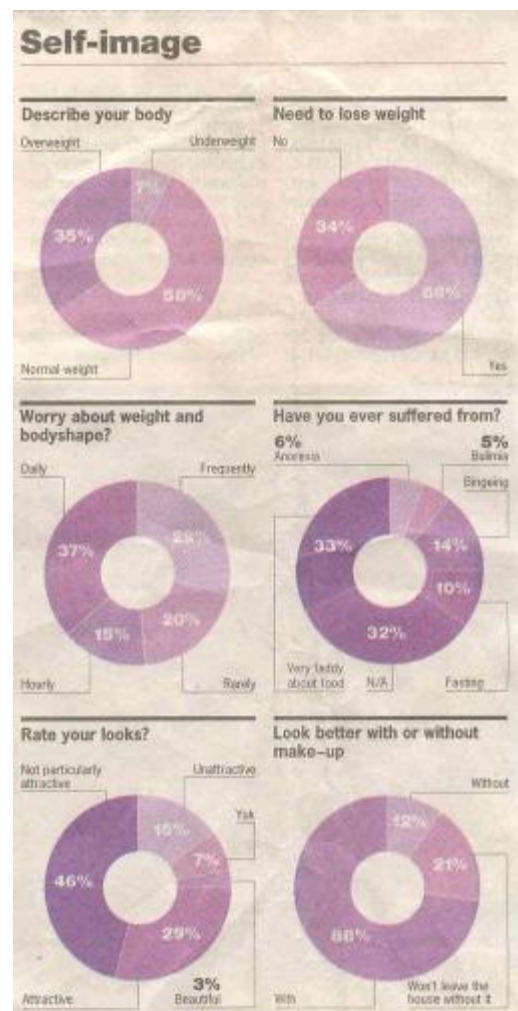
Bliss magazine, which is aimed at girls aged 13 to 18, questioned 2,000 girls over 10 television regions, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The average respondent was 14, 5ft 4in tall and weighed 8st 8lb (163cm and 54.4kg).

The survey found that while 58% of teenage girls believe themselves to be of normal weight - with 35% describing themselves as overweight and 7% underweight - 66% think they need to lose weight and 71% claim they would be "100% happier if they could lose half a stone".

"We get a lot of letters from our readers about body image," said Chantelle Horton, deputy editor of Bliss. "There are letters about the extremes of obesity and anorexia, but in general body obsession is a defining factor.

"I think the female obsession with body image is not a new phenomenon, but young girls are now exposed to more images of 'perfection' all the time - in magazines, on TV, in films and music videos and advertisements."

The study also revealed some disquieting trends in teenage girls' eating habits. Just 48% said they eat vegetables every day, while precisely the same number said they ate chocolate on a daily basis.



A quarter of respondents admitted they had already suffered from an eating disorder - 6% citing anorexia, 5% bulimia and 14% binge-eating.

Ann McPherson, an Oxfordshire GP who treats teenagers with eating disorders, and runs the website teenagehealthfreak.org, was not surprised by the survey's findings.

"It's pretty awful, isn't it?" she said. "There's pressure on young girls [to look a certain way] and there's pressure on women - it runs the whole

way through. One would like girls to feel good about themselves and not feel they had to conform to stereotypes."

The study found that 65% of girls had dieted in the past, with 14% describing themselves as constantly on a diet, and 32% saying they would consider plastic surgery.

"They don't think of long-term solutions to their body image problems," says Horton. "It's all about the quick fix - and that's drilled into them by the

fact their mums might be on the Atkins diet or they see a celebrity with a wonky nose who gets it fixed with surgery."

Images of "perfect" celebrities were cited by 67% as a source of pressure to be slimmer. Similar numbers said they felt pressure from boys (65%) and other girls (63%).

Asked to nominate celebrities with the best bodies, the curvaceous J-Lo, Beyoncé and Britney Spears took the top three places.

Asked to construct the perfect female form, the teenagers plumped for Beyoncé's face, Jennifer Aniston's hair and arms, Christina Aguilera's breasts, Britney Spears's stomach, Jamelia's legs and J-Lo's derriere.

"J-Lo, Beyoncé, Britney ... none of them are stick insects," Horton observed. "They're all curvy and they've all spoken publicly about their physical flaws."

Ultimately, however, it is teenage girls' relentless exposure to images of celebrities that may be distorting their body image.

"Teenagers have always worried about their bodies," said Dr McPherson, "but I think now their worries are exacerbated with the whole promotion of the celebrity."



'I think that dieting is just silly'

Alana Barlow, 15, of Manchester:

I don't think I'm fat, I don't think I'm skinny. I hope I'm normal weight - I don't want to lose any weight. I like my height as well.

I'm not surprised by the survey, though. Sometimes I feel like that about my body, on a bad day, and I know a lot of friends who often feel that way.

I eat a lot of chocolate every day, but other than that I eat healthily and I do quite a lot of exercise - I walk a lot, do PE at school, and tai kwon do and kayaking.

I think dieting's silly and so does my mum. My friends aren't on diets, but a lot say they want to eat healthier. I think it's just a way of dieting, really.

The majority of girls at my school seem to feel happy with themselves, though I do know people who've made themselves sick.

I know girls who say they're too fat. But they don't do anything about it, just moan.

One girl I know went on a crash diet. She'd have a bowl of cereal for breakfast and say that was all she'd had to eat all day. She only kept it up three days.

Celebrities in general are too skinny - they're a bad example. Girls need a role-model who's positive about herself. Maybe like Pink.

J-Lo and Beyoncé - people say they're curvy but it's still a shape girls feel they have to look like. And that's not good.

Activities

Discuss the following in your groups and answer the following, either individually or as a group response:

What does the article suggest about the difference between self image and ideal self in teenage girls?

What influences are there to pressure teenage girls into becoming anxious about their appearance and/or diet?

Drawing on psychology you have studied in the last year, what explanations can you suggest for the pressures on the girls? (You might like to consider social influence, gender studies, social learning theory etc.)

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