Middle School Girls’ Friendship Preferences: 
Attitudes towards Girls who are Obese

Introduction

What we know from existing research is:

- Peer acceptance is critical to girls’ social development, friendship formations, self-esteem, psychosocial well-being, and quality of life.  
- Friends with peers are often based on perceived similarities (i.e., attitudes, values, personality traits) and appearance, such as weight.  
- Teasing intensifies in middle school and weight.  
- Obesity increases a girl’s susceptibility to peer victimization and heightens the negative psychological consequences.  

Study objectives

1. To understand the perceived attractiveness and preference relative to desirability as a friend based on outward appearance.
2. To identify the idiographic rationale for girls’ choices to provide insight into the motivation to initiate friendships relative to another girl’s appearance.

Methods

Unlike previous research, in this study a girl who is obese desirability as a friend was compared not only to girls of other races or with physical disabilities, but also to a girl with an intellectual disability.  

Participants:

Eighty-three 7th and 8th grade girls were recruited from four schools, three public and one private, in New Hampshire and Maine. Average age was 13 years old. The majority of participants were white (n=69). Average weight of girls was 116.9 lbs and height was 62.8 inches, with an average BMI (20.8) within normal range.

Instrument:

The Friendship Preference Activity (FPA) measures friendship choices of girls based on appearance. Participants rank 8 girls from their photograph as most desirable to least desirable as potential friends. This is done by selecting self-adhesive images and placing them in order on the activity work sheet. An explanation for each choice is written next to the image.

Data Analysis:

Descriptive analysis (i.e., frequencies) was used to rank each girl. Content analysis was performed i.e., the written explanations were independently coded by authors, agreement was established, and the written explanations were reviewed, to identify three themes.

Results

Table 1: Most Popular

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasses</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obese</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crutches</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down Syndrome</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Least Popular

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasses</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obese</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crutches</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down Syndrome</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

- Assumptions middle school girls associated with physical appearances and similarity to self are attributed to other girls when determining desirability as friends i.e. the white girl who is popular and described as nice, happy, and seem as homogeneous with self-identity.
- Participants did not desire the girl with an intellectual disability as a friend because they lack knowledge about how to relate to her. However, as in past research, the stigma associated with obesity was explicitly expressed towards the girl who was obese (i.e., attributions of blame for weight and negative qualities such as laziness).
- Findings validate that girls who are overweight are marginalized by peers based on predetermined stigmatizing attitudes.

Conclusions

Physical appearance influences middle school girls’ friendship choices. The most desired friends by participants were the white girl and white girl on a crutches, who were perceived as most similar to themselves. Girls who are obese are stigmatized by peers and are seen as undesirable as friends comparative to girls with a cognitive disability. Three themes emerged explaining friendship preference based on appearance: she is like me, I can help her, and I don’t think we would be friends.

Implications

- Peer stigmatization and limited knowledge creates a lack of social opportunities with negative consequences for social development, psychological well-being, and self-esteem.
- There is a need to address biases and friendship preference when fostering social participation and involvement in peer groups.
- Further evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies that address the psychosocial consequences of obesity are essential.
- Strategies for decreasing bullying and stigmatization by peers, especially in school settings.
- Healthcare and education professionals need to be aware of and address personal prejudices to create an accepting climate for all adolescents.

References


Acknowledgments

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