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This Girl Can, can’t she? Perspectives from physical activity providers and participants on what factors influence participation

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# Abstract

*Aims*: The present study used a multi-method approach to qualitatively explore whether the perceptions of girls and exercise providers are aligned in terms of the factors that influence participation with the aim to better understand how these factors influence participation.  
*Design*: Thematic analysis was used to synthesise focus groups and interview data within the intrapersonal, interpersonal, organisation, environmental, and policy levels of an ecological model.  
*Methods*: Interviews were conducted with 4 experienced exercise providers (2 male, 2 female). Focus groups were conducted with 21 young women and girls (M = 17.9, SD = 2.4) who had participated in one of the exercise interventions developed and delivered by the providers.   
*Results*: The perceptions of participants and providers were often disparate but revolved around the same themes especially at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. They expressed contrasting views regarding the importance of skill development and enjoyment, and the role of boys and instructors. At the organisational level, both participants and providers agreed that schools offer opportunities as well as barriers to engagement in physical activity and exercise. At the environmental level, urbanisation, safety, culture, and social media appeared as main themes where the perspectives of participants and providers complemented each other. Finally, at the policy level the main themes were derived from providers and concerned issues around programme funding. Participants provided valuable commentary about a nationwide campaign to promote physical activity to females.   
*Conclusions*: In order to provide engaging physical activity and exercise for young women and girls it is necessary to align the needs and expectations of participants and providers at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. For sustainable exercise provision that impacts young women and girls, it is essential to align funding strategies and deliverables between exercise providers, local and national stakeholders.

*Keywords:* Adherence, Clubs, Sport psychology, This Girl Can, Sport England

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Globally, girls and young women are among the least active groups in society. Physical activity (PA) is defined as any form of voluntary activity that requires energy expenditure and includes exercise, physical education, sport, as well as an unstructured activity like walking. Although the benefits of PA are well documented, less than 15% of adolescent girls are sufficiently active putting them at risk of poor health and co-morbidities associated with sedentarism (WHO, 2019). In the UK, these concerns catalysed a national campaign *This Girl Can*. This Girl Can is a multi-million-pound campaign led by Sport England and funded by the National Lottery that aims to raise PA levels among girls and women of 14-40 years regardless of body shape, size and ability. Its inception in January 2015 saw the use of television ads, outdoor media, and social media, to challenge the conventional ideas of what women’s PA looks like. Sport England also funded partner organisations that signed up to use the campaign to promote their local activities. So far, the campaign has reached over 3 million women and girls through community projects, and partnerships between exercise organisations and local councils (This Girl Can, 2019: https://www.thisgirlcan.co.uk). The *This Girl Can Lambeth* project aimed to offer exercise to urban-dwelling young women and girls (aged 14 to 21 years) and evaluate the real-life impact of the campaign in the London borough of Lambeth. The project provided the context for the current study, which aimed to juxtapose the understanding of urban girls and exercise providers regarding the factors that influence young women and girls’ PA participation.

Low levels of PA among young women and girls is a public concern that is exacerbated in ethnic minorities and those from low-income families (Sport England, 2018). This means that in UK urban settings, which are characterised by ethnic diversity, high population density, and low social-economic status, there are some of the lowest rates of PA among women and girls. These social and contextual characteristics are likely to impact the individual behaviour of young women and girls towards PA as suggested by recent research (Cushing, Brannon, Suorsa & Wilson, 2014; see also Weiss, 2020). Therefore, the present study is framed by an ecological model of health behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Sallis, Owen & Fisher, 2008). Ecological models have been used in the past to guide PA interventions so they take into account factors at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, environmental, organisational and policy levels (e.g., Elder et al., 2006). For instance, a cross-sectional study conducted in the UK found that individual, home, school and environment factors played important roles in understanding the correlates of PA in young people living in urban and non-urban areas (Wilkie et al., 2018). There is currently a gap in research that explicitly takes a multi-level approach to investigate the factors that influence the PA behaviour of young urban women and girls in the UK. A recent review of UK-based exercise interventions for young women and girls found that 20 out of 21 interventions dealt with intrapersonal factors whereas only seven dealt with multiple levels of influence (Hull, de Oliveira, & Zaidell, 2018). Of the 5 studies that identified the women and girls as living in urban areas, only two looked at levels of influence beyond intrapersonal factors. Therefore in reviewing the literature we now focus on what are the known barriers and facilitators of PA in young women and girls, and how urban environments can modulate these barriers and facilitators.

Regarding the first issue of which barriers and facilitators have been identified in young women and girls, a review of 20 studies found a need for increased choice and facilities within the community and the inclusion of a social element to PA provision (participants aged 11-16; Rees et al., 2006). For girls, in particular, barriers were associated with the way the PA was provided within schools. Girls identified highly structured traditional activities, physical education kit, changing and showering arrangements, and unrelatable and unsupportive leaders as barriers to their PA engagement. A more recent review of 12 qualitative studies found that adolescents perceived behavioural attitude, motivation, self-efficacy, physical self-perception, fun, friends, family, teachers, and environmental opportunities to be the main factors that influence their participation (Martins, Marques, Sarmento & da Costa, 2015). These results highlight the complex and multi-faceted nature of factors that impact girls’ participation in PA and suggest that there are a number of elements to consider when designing and delivering PA interventions for young women and girls.

Regarding the second issue of how urban environments modulate barriers and facilitators, most research has been about sports and has been conducted in the US but provides some important insights. For example, compared with higher-income parents, lower-income parents perceive schools and the community to offer more sports opportunities for boys’ than girls’ (Sabo & Veliz, 2008). The authors show that parents of African-American, Hispanic and Asian ancestry are more likely to perceive their sons to be very interested in sport compared to their daughters, whereas this difference is not present in white parents. Importantly, urban girls first enter sports between one and four years later than girls from more affluent families or less urban areas. In a qualitative study of girls’ sport participation Wright, Griffes and Gould (2017) report that girls from urban areas experience unique challenges with sports involvement due to financial and logistical constraints, and also culturally-related body-image and cosmetic concerns. Another US-based study used a social-ecological framework to explore how urban African-American adolescent girls overcome multi-level barriers to sport participation (Cox, 2014). Through focus groups, the study found that girls aged between 13 and 17 perceived barriers regarding image, race and gender identity, lack of skill and ability, criticism from significant others, negative influences from coaches, and limited resources and access. The study concluded that stakeholders need to better understand the interplay of personal, social, cultural and environmental factors that girls experience, and utilize this knowledge when designing and implementing interventions to best serve urban African-American female adolescents. Cox’s recommendations include providing fun and varied opportunities, that are gender-specific and culturally relevant, and employing African-American women in coaching and administrative positions to serve as role models. An earlier report for providers on how to recruit and keep urban American girls engaged in exercise programs includes these and other recommendations (Sabo, Ward & Oliveri, 2009).

The engagement of young women and girls in PA and exercise depends largely on what is on offer in their schools and communities. A meta-analysis evaluating the effectiveness of school and community interventions to increase PA in younger girls (5-11 years) found they had a significant but small effect (Biddle, Braithwaite & Pearson, 2014). The authors suggest that the providers of exercise should design interventions that are girls-only and multicomponent, for instance including education plus environment change. A study by Taymoori, Niknami, Berry and Lubans (2008) illustrates how interventions can be carefully designed to meet the specific cultural needs of a particular population and culture, in this case Iranian adolescent girls. The decisions made by providers in designing interventions largely determine how culturally-appropriate, environmentally-sound and effective they are in engaging participants. Therefore it is important to explore the perspectives of providers about what factors they take into account when designing interventions for young urban women and girls.

In summary, urban young women and girls do not engage sufficiently in PA despite efforts by exercise providers to design interventions that meet the (perceived) expectations and needs of this population. Therefore, the present study explored the perspectives of exercise providers and young women and girls on what factors influence exercise participation so that recommendations could be drawn at different levels of the ecological model. Exercise providers and young women and girls are referred henceforth as providers and participants, respectively.

**Method**

**Philosophical assumptions**

In line with the aim of our study, we situated this research within a critical realist position framed by ontological realism and epistemological constructivism. A realist ontological position implies that causal mechanisms are at the root of phenomena and that there is an external reality that exists independently of the human mind. It also posits that events can only be understood through theory-laden lenses (Fletcher, 2017) meaning that only glimpses of that reality can be accessed (e.g., Levers, 2018; Poucher, Tamminen, Caron & Sweet, 2019). According to Levers (2018, p. 3), ‘there is epistemological latitude within ontological delimitations. For example, believing that a world exists independently of awareness does not necessitate that meaning exists in the same way’ (but see Poucher, Tamminen, Caron & Sweet, 2019, Supplementary material). Our constructivist epistemology implied a belief that what participants said about their experiences of PA, and what providers said about their perspectives on the young women’s PA was directly related to their behaviours, values, beliefs, identities and experiences (Maxwell, 2012). At the same time, we acknowledged that what was said was socially influenced, both before meeting the researcher and during the interviews/ focus groups (Maxwell, 2012). Before the meeting, this influence was through the socially constructed identities of providers/ participants (through their discourses and experiences) in their particular (urban) social and cultural contexts. During the interviews/ focus groups, this social influence existed because the interaction with the researcher meant there was a co-construction of meaning both in terms of how the providers/ participants constructed their discourse (e.g., what they chose to say and not say, what expressions they chose to use, how the women interacted with their peers), and how the researcher interpreted their discourse (e.g., most evident in making sense of colloquialisms and the strength of certain urban experiences). In the context of the latter influence, the background of the lead researcher is important. She is a young British woman of mixed White and Black-Caribbean heritage and has a background in a competitive sport where she remains active. There was a perceived level of mutual understanding between the researcher and the young women and girls/providers around urban experiences and the use of colloquial language, which helped the researcher guide the discussion/interviews during data collection. In interpreting the data, the background of the researcher also informed how data was coded and the formulation of women-centred recommendations.

These ontological realist and epistemological constructivist underpinnings are evident (a) in how the interview guides were structured but conducted flexibly (b) in how the data analysis allowed the identification of themes within a framework (c) in the results where quotes are used to stay close to the discourse of the providers/participants and to show results as a third-person account of their discourse (d) in the discussion of themes where the different perspectives are juxtaposed to allow a more holistic glimpse into the experiences of young women and girls regarding their PA (see details of all below).

**Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit both exercise providers, and young women and girls (referred to as providers and participants, respectively). The four providers (aged 30-58, M = 40.3, SD = 12.5) were commissioned by the London borough council of Lambeth for the *This Girl Can Lambeth* project to deliver exercise to young women and girls. Two providers were women and two were men; two providers were White-British and two were British Afro-Caribbean with on average 15.3 (SD = 5) years of coaching experience and 7 (SD = 2.9) years of experience as exercise providers. Three of the providers founded their respective charities and the fourth was leading the exercise element of a multi-service charity. The four charities delivered the following exercise sessions: Boxing, Multi-sport, Football, Mixed Martial Arts. The providers’ role within their charities was to develop community exercise, which included designing exercise programs, logistical planning, sourcing funding, and the employment and training of staff (see Supplementary material A for a description of each provider).

The 21 young women and girls (aged 14-21 years, M = 17.9, SD = 2.4) were recruited from the four exercise providers’ programs to take part in two focus groups each. All participants who volunteered took part in the study. Of the 21 participants, 18 were in education (3 of which in Higher Education), and 3 were in full-time employment, all in London. Each focus group consisted of participants from the same girls-only exercise program. The programs and number of participants in the focus group were: Boxing (n=6), Multi-sports (n=5), Football (n=4) and Mixed Martial Arts (n=6). Adherence to the study was very high as only one participant recruited at baseline did not attend the follow-up focus group. Five participants only attended one or two exercise sessions from the program but attended both focus groups. All participants lived in London and 85.7% of them identified as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic. All providers and participants (and guardians where appropriate) gave consent to participate in the study, which was approved by the University Ethics Panel (SAS1621 and SAS1719).

**Procedure**

Prior to data collection, interview guides for both the focus groups with participants and the interviews with providers were developed based on four sources: literature, the researchers’ experience with the *This Girl Can Lambeth* stakeholders, consultation with Britain Thinks, and pilot studies conducted to refine the guides (see Supplementary material B for pilot study details). All guides contained questions pertaining to participants’ experiences and perceptions of PA and exercise, and providers’ experiences of designing and delivering exercise for young women and girls. Refinements included a reduced number of questions and the inclusion of additional probes. The four focus groups took place at the start of the exercise program and 10 weeks later; this was to explore whether different factors emerged before and after their engagement with the exercise programs (see Supplementary material C for focus group guides). Each exercise provider took part in a semi-structured interview and had no knowledge of the results of the focus groups (see Supplementary material D for interview guide). Both focus groups (60-90 min) and interviews (42-82 min) were conducted face-to-face by the lead researcher, and a dictaphone was used to record both the focus groups and interviews (and an intern student took notes during the focus groups). The questions included in both the focus groups and interviews were predominantly open-ended to facilitate the process of gathering rich and comprehensive data aimed at eliciting stories, experiences, and perspectives of the participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Probes were used to encourage clarification or more detail.

For the focus groups, participants were encouraged to speak freely, discuss with one another, and consider different perspectives or experiences from their own. Although individual interviews might have been preferable for exploring personal experiences in-depth, the group dynamic allowed for the elicitation of a multiplicity of views and experiences within the same social context and peer group, given the pre-existing rapport between the group members (Schinke, McGannon, Battochio & Wells, 2013). In addition, participants could feel comfortable and empowered from having the knowledge and experience, while the researcher may have been seen as an interested outsider. Ultimately, using focus groups as a method of data collection aligned well with our study’s purpose and underpinning constructivist orientation. For the interviews, previous project-related meetings where both the researchers and the exercise providers were present alongside other collaborators, facilitated the development of rapport during the interviews. The semi-structured approach taken for the interviews allowed participants the freedom to discuss in-depth experiences. They could share the experiences most important to them, but also allowed researchers to focus on areas of interest specific to each providers’ organisation and discuss unexpected phenomena (Williams, Smith & Papathomas, 2018). Importantly, there were no co-dependencies between providers and the research team. The exercise providers were sent copies of their transcripts and approved them before data analysis commenced. This was done to reassure them that any unwanted or inaccurate excerpts could be removed (cf., Norman, 2008) given their anonymity could not be guaranteed among the project stakeholders.

**Data analysis**

Template analysis, guided by the steps outlined by Brooks, McCluskey, Turley and King (2014) and Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to thematically analyse both the focus group and interview data.

First, all recordings were transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher; following this, the researcher read and re-read transcripts to familiarise herself with the content. Reflexiveness was used at this stage to record initial impressions (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Smith, 2004). A second researcher read the transcripts and acted as a critical friend in discussing the lead researcher’s initial impressions. Second, the lead researcher used data management software (MAX-QDA 12) to generate preliminary codes across the data set. Third, the researcher collated the codes into initial themes and sub-themes. These initial themes and sub-themes were discussed with the second researcher to gain further insight into the data. Fourth, the themes were thematically mapped. Based on discussions around the thematic map, the researchers decided that the ecological model would be a useful template to categorise themes. This template was instrumental in highlighting themes that impacted participants at the broader levels of influence (e.g., environment). For each level, the themes which emerged as most prevalent were identified. Fifth, the themes and sub-themes were defined and named to represent the essence of the participants’ or providers’ perceptions of the factors that influence participation. Sixth, the perceptions of providers and participants were synthesised in line with the aim of the study. This was done by exploring the similarities and differences between the two sets of themes and generating new themes that represented both views of the participants and providers. Seventh, coded extracts were evaluated in relation to the themes by selecting compelling extracts and relating these back to the research objective and the literature. Flexible following of the steps outlined by Brooks, McCluskey, Turley and King (2014) and Braun and Clarke (2006) allowed for a systematic and analytic approach that was tailored to the data sets and the aim of the study. The identification of key themes in our thematic analysis aimed to “capture something important in relation to the overall research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Ultimately, the themes were dependent upon what they revealed about the perceptions of participants and providers regarding the multi-level factors that influence young women and girls’ participation in PA and exercise.

## **Results and discussion**

To juxtapose the perspectives of the participants and the providers, the findings are presented together and each of the identified main themes are organised such that the presentation of providers’ perspectives precede that of the participants. The themes are structured by an adapted ecological model (see also Figure 1) and sub-themes identified in the data are explored and synthesised. At the Intrapersonal level the main themes were *Mind over (body)matter* and *Do girls JUST want to have fun?* At the Interpersonal level the main themes were *Males: friends or foes?* and *Instructors: the good, the bad, the ugly*. At the Organisation level the main themes were *All about school* and *Ladies first?* At the Environmental level, the main themes were *Cultural in-appropriation* and *Safe spaces*. At the Policy and Legislative level, the main themes were *The devil is in the numbers* and *This Girl Can*. Each of the main themes is first presented and then interpreted and discussed with reference to literature (signposted “Discussion of the theme”) before presenting the next main theme. Recommendations regarding the increase of young women and girls’ participation in PA and exercise are formulated based on the interpretation and discussion of the interviews and focus groups.

**Intrapersonal**

The main themes were *Mind over (body)matter* (with sub-themes physical self-perception vs. mental state) and *Do girls JUST want to have fun?* (with sub-themes enjoyment vs. personal development).

**Mind over (body)matter.** All four exercise providers perceived physical self-perception as an influential factor that impacts girls’ participation in exercise. While they all recognised that physical appearance can be a barrier to engagement with exercise, and several providers identified “a need for body image workshops” and the “normalisation of sweating and jiggling”, they also stated ways in which it can be a motivation for girls. Providers stated that improving their physical appearance and weight-loss act as strong influencers for some girls. Three of the providers identified weight management as a motivation, “[you] are doing it because you realise there’s benefit of weight loss and maybe you’re an overweight girl”. One provider also stated that girls may be motivated to tone and sculpt their bodies with the intention of improving their appearance: “some of them just wanna get their beach bodies ready”.

Differently to the providers, all participants associated their participation in these exercise sessions predominately with psychological health. Many of the participants felt that exercise positively enhances “your mood”, “improves your mental state and not just your physical state”, and these were reasons for their continued engagement in the exercise program. Some participants spoke about confidence as a benefit of the exercise program; one said that it had improved her confidence in all areas of her life not just in exercise, another stated:

![Diagram

Description automatically generated]()I remember my first ever session I was like the little scared girl in the corner ‘cos I didn’t know anyone, and I wasn’t confident with anyone and it’s like now I go there and I’m a bit too comfortable with some people.

*Figure 1*. Depiction of main themes and sub-themes organised by the different levels of the ecological model from intrapersonal to policy and legislative levels. The diagonal column on the left shows the sub-themes from interviews with providers. The diagonal column on the right shows the sub-themes from the focus groups with participants. Along the central column are the main themes synthetized from the interviews with the providers and focus groups with the participants.

Participants also identified exercise as a source of happiness, a tool to manage stress, and an “outlet” for negative feelings:

It switches my mood, I don’t know, I always say it to people whenever I’m annoyed I just wanna play football because it just makes me happy.

I started in year 10 like towards the end of year 10 and obviously in year 10 you’re stressing about exams and then you get to year 11 and you’re going crazy and now year 12 I feel I have like 10 breakdowns a day erm but football, it like picks me up and like all the stress about schoolwork or school goes away at the weekend I think I get time to go and do what I enjoy and play football. It makes me happy.

Discussion of the theme. The provider’s views were that exercise is both a concern for girls in regard to their physical self-perception and a means of improving their physical self-perception. Participants were aware of the physical benefits of PA, but their views indicate that the perceived positive impact of exercise on their confidence, stress-levels and happiness is what most heavily influences their participation. Both the providers and participants are likely to have been influenced by public information on the physical and physiological benefits of exercise and by the pervasive representations of the ideal female body. However, participants seemed to value the psychological benefits of participation above all in terms of continued adherence. This may be for two reasons. First, physical and physiological changes develop over time whereas some of the psychological benefits can be felt more immediately. Second, urban-dwelling girls in this study feel stress due to the demands of school (see later) and living in socially-deprived urban settings (see also later) and so the respite provided by exercise may be particularly welcome. Research has shown a positive dose-response association between exercise levels and happiness (Richards et al., 2015), but the psychological benefits of exercise are perhaps insufficiently highlighted to young women and girls. Their perceptions support the idea that exercise is efficacious in improving psychological factors, and offer some additional insight into the reasons why happiness is associated with exercise.

Participants were also aware of the physical benefits of exercise but, in contrast to the providers, did not mention physical appearance as a motivating factor. If providers view physical appearance as a main factor in girls’ adherence, they are likely to pass this on to coaches who may mention this as a motivator during sessions, thus adding (further) to the problematisation of the female body. While previous research has shown that participating in exercise can improve physical self-perception for adolescent girls (Burgess, Grogan & Burwitz, 2006), we propose this is not because of improvements in appearance but because of improvements in mental wellbeing. These findings have implications for policy makers, public health campaigns and those working directly with young women and girls, as the focus on using exercise to primarily improve physical appearance may not motivate them to engage with it. Future campaigns should highlight the psychological benefits of exercise rather than the appearance of their bodies, and it may be useful for exercise sessions to integrate a moment of reflection and planning where participants can take a mindful approach to tackling their sources of stress.

**Do girls JUST want to have fun?** All four providers identified enjoyment as a factor that influences girls’ exercise participation and long-term engagement. The providers described the positive role enjoyment plays and ways to promote or undermine it. Music, variety, participants’ input, and creating a social atmosphere were identified as ways to promote enjoyment among the young women and girls. They felt that creating a fun and social environment was a key way to engage them, because exercise “is not a priority to them”. One provider said: “I think it’s what’s put in front of them and whether they enjoy it when it’s there in front of them”. Another provider stated that the integration of music was one way to achieve a fun environment and engage some of the most disengaged girls, as this is a very different approach to that taken in traditional PE classes: “a girl sitting out and as soon as she hears our music is on, everyone else is having fun, they’ll get involved”. Another strategy for engaging this population was to include variety and make the activity “novel and tailored”. All providers emphasised the need to promote a social environment. One provider stated that this can be achieved by designating time for the girls to socialise with one another in between activities or drills:

They do a bit, they sit out, they have a little chat and then I go “do you wanna do some pads?” “oh yeah yeah, I like pads” and then they’ll go in and do some pads again, and then they’ll sit back down again and have a little chat and then I’ll go “come on then let’s finish off with skipping”.

One provider said that starting a girls-only program made his organisation realise there was “lots to learn” about girls-specific delivery, so they sought input from the girls to tailor the activities they were providing and saw positive results:

The girls you know we tried that [the same approach they took with boys] and it just didn’t work, it fell on its face. They were like “nope, no. We’re not doing it, we’re not doing laps.” “no but you have to do it.” “I don’t have to do anything.” So we thought: alright let’s stop and let’s assess this and then so that’s when we started to engage them and asked “okay, how do you want the session to run? What are you guys interested in? Are you interested in fitness? Are you interested in winning matches?”.

The providers also identified competition and low self-efficacy as the main barriers to enjoyment. Factors such as “fear of embarrassment” and not having the “necessary skills” or physical attributes to be ‘good’ at the activity were also identified as a deterrent:

Not being good enough, I think is the main thing which is why you have to make a session fun and enjoyable rather than competitive because if it’s competitive and she knows she’s not very good at something, then it makes it that much harder. But if it’s fun and enjoyment then it’s like “oh don’t worry about it”…as soon as you put competition on anything, it can go the wrong way so I think it’s gotta be fun and it’s gotta be something they enjoy.

In this connection, participants identified personal development as an important motivation and a valued outcome. Although they had a broad range of ability and experience, many of them expressed benefits such as “learning a new skill”, “learning new things about [themselves]”, pushing themselves out of their “comfort zone”, and focusing on “self-improvement” rather than comparing themselves to others. For example, one participant gave their reasons for continuing to attend the sessions:

More self-improvement and becoming a better version of myself…seeing myself compared to how I was prior to boxing erm it kind of motivates me to keep going forward and see how far I can really go.

One of the older participants (20 years old) added:

Yeah looking at all these fit people can be demotivating thinking that I’ll never get to that level but as long as you see progress and think about comparing yourself 6 months from now to where you started, that is quite motivating. You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone else, you are in competition with yourself and becoming a better version of yourself.

Other participants spoke about realising they are “talented” and “competitive”, and enjoyed “pushing” themselves in their chosen activity. After the 10-week intervention period 75% of the participants said they were happy with their levels of exercise, which saw an increase of 35% above the level reported during the baseline focus groups. Most of the participants were not concerned with competing or pursuing their exercise as a career, but many of them expressed that they wanted to develop skills and see progress because “you’re not wasting time, like, if we wanted to chat we would just stay at home”.

Discussion of the theme. The positive outlook on self-improvement indicates that by engaging in exercise participants may have developed effective strategies for personal evaluation and individual goal setting, which has led to enjoyment. This suggests that the providers may have been able to encourage a growth mindset among young women and girls, which increased their motivation and adherence. This can be encouraged in the sessions through positive coaching (Visek, Achrati, Manning, McDonnell, Harris & DiPietro, 2015) including tailored feedback and language, which emphasise self-development and skill (Dweck, 1999). The providers adapted traditional delivery of exercise to cater to what they believed were the needs of the girls. The providers’ adaptations align with the recommendations made by Rees et al. in their review (2006), which found that less structured activities with an emphasis on socialising were most attractive to youth between the ages of 11 and 16. They also align with what Visek and colleagues (2015) identified as positive coaching when building a conceptual map of sources of fun for young people in sport. However, the providers’ perspectives allude to a mutually exclusive relationship between enjoyment and competition or skill development, whereas participants appear to find enjoyment in healthy competition with themselves and others (as seen below in ‘Males’). For the young women and girls fun was linked with the internal sources identified by Visek and colleagues as learning and improving, trying hard and mental bonuses. This misalignment is not surprising as previous studies such as Jones (2002) have found that coaches and parents’ perceptions of fun and enjoyment differ from the perceptions of young participants. This has implications for exercise providers as it may be important to include some (self-)competitive elements in exercise programs to engage a variety of young women and girls, but it may also be important to consider the skill level and the goals of participants.

**Interpersonal**

At the interpersonal level, the main themes were *Males: Friends or foes?* (with sub-theme males) and *Instructors: The good, the bad, the ugly* (with sub-themes instructors vs. coaches). While the providers and the participants identified the same themes, they viewed male influence and the role of the instructor quite differently.

**Males: Friends or foes?** All four exercise providers agreed that in adolescence girls become more influenced by males and identified instances when they have perceived males to have both a positive and negative effect. One provider stated: “A lot of girls at that age become interested or fascinated by boys but that can bring some of them to our sessions”. Some providers felt that male encouragement and endorsement can directly increase girls’ participation:

They’re gonna go where the boys are, that’s a given. But then actually if [the boys] said “we’re gonna go down to play basketball, do you wanna play basketball?” They would go and play basketball wouldn’t they?

Some providers felt that although girls-only sessions do have their place, mixed gender sessions can be crucial in developing and supplying individuals with a wider variety of experiences to refine their skill. One provider said “The best female players we traditionally see, play football with boys”. Another provider stated:

In terms of looking at a specific sport like boxing there’s no need for it to be female-only. If you spar, you spar females but when you train there’s males within that, and I think you need that within that context and within that setting because you’re always learning about different shapes and different sizes and different abilities. And our mixed sessions here probably get thirty-forty percent females. So it’s a nice mixture.

At the same time, the providers recalled difficulties in engaging young women and girls during mixed sessions. For example, one provider described it as a “headache”, other providers said:

If boys are in the same vicinity as them, they tend to not perform as well as they can…[if males are absent] they’re more likely to get more involved, more stuck in. Erm they’re more likely to enjoy it, they’re more likely to come back the next week.

where we’ve had the two together, the boys started acting up cos they’re trying to impress the girls…and then the girls, if there are boys around, start acting up, they stop training hard and everything is for show. So you kind of lose focus.

Some providers went further to say they felt sessions decreased in value when they were mixed gender. Rather than being able to provide engaging sessions “it just turns the session into more of a kind of erm you know classroom situation where now you’re disciplining kids”. Some providers felt these difficulties increased with age, “…the under 12’s, you can mix them and we have done and it’s been fine. Erm certainly when they get older it’s a lot more difficult. It’s not impossible but it’s a lot more difficult”.

Similarly to the providers, participants had mixed views about exercising with boys and the opinions of boys towards girls participating in exercise. The participants agreed that they had a “supportive” and “friendly” environment within their girls-only sessions, and some even felt that exercising with boys would be “uncomfortable” and “intimidating”, and that boys of a similar age may be “unsupportive”. For example, one participant stated:

Yeah we’ll feel like erm if we fumble they’ll laugh or something like that so that’s why it’s good to have no boys. Especially cos we’ve got…some people that are like up here and then we’ve got others that are just not quite there so obviously if you’re playing amongst girls then you’re not really gonna care what your performance is like ‘cos you’re amongst your own sort of thing. Whereas as soon as you get in front of boys you’re like “I don’t wanna play” yeah like “I can’t control the ball”, “I can’t kick straight”, “I dunno how to catch” or whatever.

Another participant said she had experience of playing football with boys and felt that they had “low expectations” but also did not give her the credit she was due:

They were all like ‘ah she’s good for a girl’ and I hate hearing that. I hate hearing that so much, like what do you mean? So if I was a boy I wouldn’t be good enough? It just really frustrates me.

Some participants expressed that they prefer to exercise in girls-only environments because they perceived the physical differences between genders to give boys an advantage in an exercise setting:

I think with a female-only group, it’s a lot more healthier competition ‘cos like…with males for example, you know your body strength and theirs are always gonna be different like you might be faster than someone but you’re never really gonna be stronger in that sense. You can do the same training but a male will always come out stronger or gain muscle faster so the competition sometimes is unrealistic so it might put you down like they’re excelling or whatever and you’re not, but that’s because it’s unrealistic. Whereas with female-only groups it’s more of a healthier competition because you’re on the same level.

On the other hand, some participants felt that exercising and competing with males would be positive because it would motivate them, it would be challenging, and it would test their skills. For example, two participants said:

Yeah ‘cos if you’re honest we are better than some of the boys but most of them are better than us so like if we’re playing with people better than us it’ll help us like strive to be better and like it will like help us in the way we play so like for example we get more skilful and tactical and stuff like that ‘cos most of them have a higher skill than us.

It’ll definitely be harder because I think if the boys played against us they would make it their motive to win and if they didn’t win they’d feel some type of way so it would be a challenge but it would be a good challenge.

Several participants shared the view that male opinions regarding their ability and skill “held more weight” than the opinions of other girls:

I have male friends saying “I like you playing football, continue” that makes me more happy than if a girl’s saying it because it’s like girls have to say it but if a man says it, it’s like it’s coming from their heart…Yeah ‘cos I feel like girls in this generation shouldn’t put each other down so they have to say “ah yeah continue with football, I like that”. They say it because they’re one of you but if a man says it then it kind of shows true meaning... If they say it you think they really like it and it motivates you a bit more.

I agree with [her]. When the boys at my school say I’m good at football, I think it hits me more than when girls say it.

Discussion of the theme. These findings indicate that young women and girls feel a significant influence from boys in exercise environments (both positive and negative), and that encouragement from boys can be particularly powerful. Few studies have explored gender-specific peer influence in this context but some studies looked at gender-specific parental influence and found fathers play more of a role in the PA behaviours of children through encouragement, facilitation, and co-participation (Zahra, Sebire & Jago, 2015), an effect that is particularly prominent with daughters (Morgan et al., 2018). This reinforces the idea that boys and men in different roles have the potential to successfully encourage and promote exercise to young women and girls.

The perspectives of providers and participants also highlight a complex relationship between boys and girls within exercise settings with no consensus as to whether it has a positive or negative influence on the exercise behaviour of girls. A previous study found that the presence of men in exercise settings increased social physique anxiety for women, but this was not the case for men (Kruisselbrink, Dodge, Swanburg & Macleod, 2004). Another study compared the experiences of girls-only physical education (PE) and mixed-gender PE and found that girls in the mixed-gender group felt pressure to be both feminine and good at sport (Evans, 2006). These findings support the providers’ views that boys have a large influence over girls in an exercise setting but the complex nature of the influence of boys on girls’ exercise participation warrants further study. In terms of recommendations, mixed-gender interventions may be more successful when the emphasis is on skill development or fun rather than competition. However, it might be even more important to address the participants’ narrative of male domination and importance in sport. Exercise organisations (and schools) should aim to provide girls with inspiring women as role models (see later sub-theme of *Social media*) who can illustrate women’ prowess in sport and should encourage a culture where boys and girls support and motivate each other.

**Instructors: The good, the bad, the ugly.** All four providers agreed that exercise instructors can have a large impact on the enjoyment and long-term maintenance of exercise, and it is, therefore, crucial that instructors are carefully chosen and trained. Two of the providers stated that they felt community coaches were better placed than physical education teachers to increase exercise levels in girls due to relatability and playing a multifaceted role in their development:

you’re still their teacher but you’re not their school teacher. And that’s where they look at you a little bit differently and that gives you that upper hand. It’s kinda like their normal P.E. teacher wouldn’t be like “here’s my phone, here, take a selfie”. Whereas I come in and they’re like “oh miss, you’re so cool, you let me take a selfie on your phone”.

When asked to describe the role of coaches in their respective organisations, all providers felt that the role involves more than just organising and delivering exercise. They emphasised the importance of being a “role model”, “mentor”, and providing “support”. One provider felt that building a rapport with young participants was more important than the actual coaching: “I’m not necessarily worried about them teaching them or being an excellent coach or teaching them the fundamentals… [coaches should] get to know the young people and act as a kind of mentor”. Several providers identified “caring” as another significant influencer in girls’ engagement. One provider believed the engagement of girls is growing “because [the girls] know that we care, that we give a toss, really”. Another provider perceived that a lack of care from PE teachers facilitates negative experiences within school, which likely lead to physical inactivity among young women and girls:

One of our schools in the league, they make their own way to [the session location], they’re not even accompanied, you know, and in the first season, the teacher rang me and asked “are they there yet?” or “Do you mind if I just send them down to you?” It’s from a [local] school but it’s still quite a way, at least half a mile. Well, I said, “if that’s in your safeguarding policy, then yeah”. They’ve got the attitude of it doesn’t really matter.

The participants described their preferences in terms of expertise, age and gender, as well as the positive and negative characteristics of instructors. They stated that good coaches are “supportive” and “confident”, “know what they’re doing”, create a “good connection” with the group, and instil a level of seriousness. One participant agreed with the providers that showing “care” is important but in terms of helping with skill development:

[some coaches] don’t really care if you do it right or do it wrong, they’re just there to do whatever and then they go. But if a coach cares about you and your progression then they’ll be a good coach.

The participants identified “unorganised”, “unconfident”, “no communication, “not listening”, and “not pushing you hard enough” as characteristics of bad coaches. Some participants said they preferred women coaches, while others suggested the standard of men coaches was higher. However, a large proportion of the girls said they would be happy with either and “it should mix up sometimes, like some weeks [men coaches] do it, some weeks [women coaches] do it cos like it just gives us a feel of both sides”. The girls disagreed on the preferred age of the coach. For example, one participant who said she would prefer an older coach stated:

My gym trainer is 50 and I think it’s weird, because she pushes me so much I wanna make her proud sometimes and I see her like erm an older woman kind of thing like mother figure kind of rather than someone young, so yeah I work differently with her.

A participant who would prefer a coach similar aged to themselves said:

[age affects the] relationship yeah because someone could be older but still be a very good coach but maybe you won’t be as buddy buddy with them as you would with someone your age but I don’t think it would make a difference that much. I prefer someone my age like similar age. ‘Cos then they’d be kind of like a mentor.

Discussion of the theme. It is clear from both participants and providers that coaches need to show care about the girls in the exercise setting. Providers placed stronger emphasis on the mentoring aspect of the relationship, while the girls spoke more to the professional skills of instructors and their ability and motivation to help them progress their skills. Mentoring is said to occur when a teacher or coach invests time into the personal development of a student or athlete. When a trusting relationship evolves, needs and interests are fulfilled, and imitation of behaviour takes place (Bloom, Bush, Schinke & Salmela, 1998). Literature suggests that if these needs can be met in the relationship between girls and instructors, it can be an effective and instrumental relationship not only for learning a new skill and maintaining adherence but also for personal development and long-term behaviour change (Felton & Jowett, 2014). It is known that perceived motor competence in childhood is related to adolescent physical activity and fitness (Barnett, Morgan, van Beurden & Beard, 2008). Also, research has established positive relationships between motor competence and multiple aspects of health in children (Robinson, Stodden, Barnett, Lopes, Logan, Rodrigues & D’Hondt, 2015) and young adults (Stodden, True, Langendorfer & Gao, 2013). To develop motor skills in young women and girls is it important that coaches and instructors (and PE teachers) receive appropriate training. However, about 40-50% of coaches in the UK have no qualification (North, 2009). North argues that the UK coaching workforce still relies heavily on volunteers but that the quality of the coaching emerging from an experienced qualified full-time coach is much higher than several part-time volunteers. A recent report finds that indeed 30% of UK coaches report problems interacting with the players and 25% problems with coaching knowledge and skills (North, 2020).

Providers perceive relationship and rapport to play an important role in engagement and set instructors apart from PE teachers in this respect. However, this may be less about the role and more about the leadership style and teaching/coaching philosophy. For instance, a study by Beauchamp and colleagues (2011) found that PE teachers fostering an empowering, inspiring, and challenging leadership style had a positive effect on self-determined motivation, self-efficacy, and intention to be physically active. Another study (Shaikh & Forneris, 2018) also emphasised relatedness through shared experiences and interests, mentoring, and support. Such findings have implications for both PE teachers and exercise coaches, as they suggest that competences and leadership style rather than role may be important in the exercise experiences of young women and girls. In this connection, the girls’ contrasting views regarding coaches’ age and gender suggest that such considerations may not be as important as the expertise the coach possesses. The girls placed the most importance on having a confident and experienced coach with good communication skills, which is in line with some of the strategies captured by Rhind and Jowett (2012). These findings have implications for exercise providers as they are responsible for employing (and training) coaches. They also have implications for coaching practice in terms of the strategies used in sessions with young women and girls. Exercise organisations may benefit from employing a diverse pool of coaches and implementing a system where young women and girls are exposed to more than one coach over the sessions to provide variety, while also allowing a more personal mentoring approach. However, the main factor mentioned by the girls is the coaching expertise, and this means that organisations must ensure their coaches are trained to high standards.

**Organisational**

At the organisational level, the main themes were *All about school* (with sub-theme schools) and *Ladies first?* (with sub-themes: charities vs. exercise providers).

**All about school*.*** All four providers agreed that schools have the power to provide either good early experiences or contribute to low participation rates among girls. The providers stated that “schools have got a hard job because they have to teach in a specific format”, whereas their own provision is more adaptable. Therefore, they thought that collaborating with schools and intervening in that setting is key to increasing girls’ participation in exercise. All providers recruited from schools and argued that “through schools you can provide a pathway” to long-term or community-based exercise. Schools provide a familiar setting, from which exercise providers can engage more easily with potential participants than from the community. One provider stated that school involvement has been a long-term goal of their organisation, and that the *This Girl Can Lambeth* project was instrumental in creating such partnerships:

We gotta get the schools involved, I was banging on about that for years until this [funding] came along. I said straight away, I said to [local council commissioner] “this is what we want, to get the schools involved”. So we started running the school leagues and straight away we were getting girls.

Three providers felt that within the school setting, enthusiastic teachers are important to the partnership as they can promote and encourage girls to engage with the providers:

if there’s a really good teacher within the school (…) I find that [teacher X] is quite proactive like that. If she’s got the time she’ll actually sit down with the group and get them all together and remind them (…) what I do find is a lot of the teachers won’t but [teacher X] is really good. She can be quite disorganised a lot of the time but when she’s on it she’ll go “right, you lot, meet me outside here” I’ll send a youth worker down [to pick them up] and I’ll know she’s arranged for them girls to be there.

Nevertheless, all four providers shared the view that schools are difficult to engage with; one stated:

We’ve always thought schools were hard work, I mean they are hard work schools, they are. They’re shocking. If I ran [our organization] like some of their PE departments we wouldn’t exist. They’re just (…) it’s just shocking correspondence you know, it’s terrible. Terrible. Erm but they’re under a lot of pressure, teachers. Who’d be a teacher, you know what I mean?

On a similar note, girls spoke about their experiences in compulsory PE stating they had often “made excuses” about menstruation and injuries to avoid the “boring” and “embarrassing” nature of PE in secondary schools. One girl said: “boring, hard and school. Usually anything to do with PE reminds me of school and is usually very repetitive, and you do the same moves and it’s difficult”. Other girls stated that, although they enjoyed PE at school and played in various teams, they felt PE was “limiting” for girls who were “not sporty or confident”. School sport was described as “unorganised” and the girls felt that engaging boys was prioritised over engaging girls:

I wish I could say I did more football ‘cos in school it’s the same thing now like there’s boys matches every single day and the girls haven’t had a match since the start of the year. Apparently we’re out of the cup but we won all of our matches so I just don’t…

When participants were asked to identify their biggest barriers to participation in PA, “school” and “homework” were among the most frequent. For example, participants stated:

I put school as the second one because there’s just so much work, you do school work and then you get homework, so you’re just stuck at home doing work, work, work. You don’t get time to go out.

School and homework put together. It’s just like I get so much and then every teacher and like I feel like they forget that I do other subjects and the amount of work they give me is ridiculous and I just have no time and plus I get no sleep zero sleep I get maybe like 4 hours… schoolwork during the day and then after school I’m in school doing schoolwork and then I get home, I shower, I eat, schoolwork, I sleep for a bit, wake up, schoolwork and then school.

Discussion of the theme. Both participants and providers agreed to the importance of schools but perceived a lack of engagement and enthusiasm for PE. This has resulted in difficulties creating and maintaining partnerships with schools for providers, and disengagement with PA and exercise for participants. A recent paper examined the implications of policies and the role of schools in PE in the UK (Griggs & Randall 2018). The authors suggest that policy and funding changes over the last two decades have led to a shift from specialist to generalist training for teachers. This has implications for the role of PE subject leaders, the quality of sessions, and the sustainability of outsourcing (Griggs & Randall, 2018), especially since 71% of reported research studies about UK-based exercise for girls takes place in educational settings (Hull, de Oliveira, Zaidell, 2018). It is important that schools provide girls with good early experiences of PA. All participants in the focus groups agreed that school plays a significant role in PA engagement. In line with Sleap and Wormald (2001), lack of time, energy, attractive provision, and negative PE experiences acted as barriers to exercise participation for the young women and girls in this study. These findings have implications for educational institutions and suggest that the PE teachers should aim to deliver the National Curriculum in an inclusive and engaging way to provide students with good and positive early experiences of exercise to stimulate life-long engagement in PA and exercise. Therefore, an effective strategy for instilling healthy habits and attitudes toward PA would be to upskill PE teachers and broaden delivery by supplementing (rather than substituting) curriculum activities with externally provided activities. Another recommendation may be to make education active and reduce the amount of homework given to young people, so they have more leisure time to be physically active. In contrast to the UK where homework and screen time are reportedly high (Emm-Collison et al., 2019), several countries where this has been implemented show maintenance or improvement in school attainment and higher levels of PA (Vatterott, 2018).

**Ladies first?**Providers felt that as non-profit organisations they are able to provide “unique” services to young women and girls, and identified multi-component activities, training opportunities, and residential trips as positive ways their organisations are able to support them specifically. One provider stated, “These are young people with issues, from around the local community that we’ve mentored, trained up ourselves, we get them accredited, we get them trained”. Another provider gave an example of a multi-component activity:

[young women leaders] came up with the idea to go abroad and do a residential somewhere else and help teach kids English and then they fundraised it all on their own with the help of one of our trustees who works for [a bank]. Basically, whatever they raised erm she was gonna double it. And we ended up doing an overnight sports event from seven at night to seven in the morning… They went to Sri Lanka, they taught English everyday, helped [Sri Lankan children] with their schoolwork, sport, and they had their free time on the beach and stuff like that.

On the other hand, participants overwhelmingly had the view that exercise providers favoured boys, arguing they received better “opportunities”, “coaches”, “incentives”, “rewards”, “promotion” and “equipment”. For example, one participant described feeling a lack of support:

With [Coach X], he’ll prioritise the boys so for example if we have a match you probably won’t see him there until either the end or halfway through but I’m pretty sure with the boys he’s always there and like erm the boys have more opportunities for example they went to like a residential… but we didn’t get that and it’s kinda like he puts the boys first.

As well as a lack of support and access to external opportunities, some participant perceived male sport to be taken more seriously because the level of professionalism and the potential earnings make it a viable career for boys. The participants said that within various exercise and sport settings their efforts were not rewarded in the same way as boys’, and they found it demotivating. For example, the following exchange between three participants:

We know this is all we get so we don’t put our 100% effort in because we feel like, we feel like we don’t need to.

Even if we work harder we’re not gonna get rewarded for it.

You see the boys and they get free stuff from Nike or Adidas but then what do the girls get? They don’t get nothing. We get [equipment] that the boys are allowed to use so really and truly we don’t have none of our own equipment.

Discussion of the theme. Although participants are actively involved in the exercise sessions, it is clear that they perceive a disparity between the way boys and girls are treated within exercise organisations and school PE. This finding is in line with the review of Corr and colleagues (2018) who found that girls perceive various gender biases in sport, which included lack of support, attention, and encouragement from instructors. This is in contrast with exercise providers who felt that they provide a much-needed service to the community, including mentoring and training the girls. The providers confirmed that charities have the flexibility to create their own programs and shape their own culture. Therefore, they may be particularly well positioned to provide girls with a variety of skills, opportunities and experiences that can enhance their attitudes and prospects (cf., Mirabella, 2014). The implications from these findings for exercise providers and instructors is that they should aim to ensure fairness in their treatment of girls in comparison to boys. For example, having someone from the exercise organisation attending competitions, rewarding boys and girls in similar ways, and providing girls with their own facilities and equipment. The current findings also have implications specifically for schools, since they suggest that it may be constructive to reduce homework, encourage active breaks, and invest in PE resources. These measures combined are likely to increase the girls’ attachment to exercise and exercise organisations, and result in increased adherence and involvement.

**Environmental**

At the environmental level, the main themes were *Cultural in-appropriation* (with sub-themes culture vs. opportunities) and *Safe spaces* (with sub-themes urbanisation vs. social media).

**Cultural in-appropriation.** All four providers identified culture as a factor that heavily influences PA participation among young women and girls. The providers spoke about cultural factors such as language, religion, and ethnicity. Two providers stated that the *This Girl Can Lambeth* project has “shown [them] how powerful sport is in kind of bringing communities together”:

we decided to run a community engagement program with the kids so we’ve got ten young people, five of them were boys and five of them were girls; all Portuguese speaking, and we said to them “…what are the themes that are important to you guys?” …So we decided to, or the kids anyway, they decided “right the best way to engage this community is to have a Portuguese speaking festival; a football festival” … The problem is that you have Angolans, Mozambicans, Brazilians you know erm Portuguese, Madeirans, and they don’t talk to each other. They’ve all got inner beef right? they all speak the same language but they’ve all got beef … that’s parent level. On the kids level they’re all cool because … they engage with all different cultures. Their parents don’t. …so they put on this tournament and it was a really successful tournament; we got local press involved… so the parents cooked the food, delivered the food and erm got to see their kids playing, and then we had a local counsellor come and speak and he’s Portuguese himself and was speaking about trying to unite everyone. And it was just a really powerful event that was youth-led to engage a really sensitive topic within this culture that’s actually affecting the young people now in terms of them coming to sessions and you know really participating in what we’re trying to do.

The providers identified Afro-Caribbean, Muslim and Hispanic girls as the main groups experiencing cultural barriers in relation to being physically active. They felt that these are “strict cultures”, where “you’re gonna be a doctor… you’re gonna be a lawyer like there’s no time for sport cos it’s not putting food on the table” or “more is required of them in the home” regarding “house work” and “babysitting”. Alongside providing women coaches and indoor facilities for Muslim girls, one provider shared an example of cultural barriers imposed by parents:

we have a girl right now who couldn’t play for us for a year erm because the dad just wouldn’t let her come and she’s one of the most talented girls we’ve ever seen. We met her at a school program… because that’s at school and the dad doesn’t know. And we were like “come to the community stuff because then you get to play matches, you get to do all of this stuff” and she’s like “I can’t, my dad doesn’t want me to”. So we got [coach X] to start calling the mum, to start calling the dad, and it was a year’s worth of engagement before she started coming.

Although all providers perceived culture as a barrier to participation, the participants felt that framing culture as a barrier was problematic and rather a lack of well-considered opportunities was the barrier. They stated that they perceived a lack of appropriate opportunities for girls especially for those who require cultural considerations such as Muslim girls. For example, two participants stated:

There’s a sports centre 2 minutes away from me but both genders go, mainly men. I’d like to feel comfortable there, I’d like to take off my hijab and be able to work out because it’s not only a gym, they have a badminton centre and 5-a-side football. It’s a whole centre that isn’t even costly either but I can’t go… and there’s no women-only times.

For me personally, I don’t think there’s a lot of activities or sessions that cater to us so for example, I didn’t mind playing football with the boys but now I don’t really wanna play football with men so I think, where do I go to play? And I think this is the only session that is a women-only boxing session that is at a convenient time.

The following is an exchange between three participants who felt that low uptake among girls can in turn reduce the amount of opportunities available:

In [my gym] there is [women-only times]. There used to be 2 to 3 sessions but because of the actual amount of girls that used to go to the sessions wasn’t enough. So they cut 2 of the sessions and now they just do the Sunday session. I think sometimes it is down to the amount of girls that want to go to the activities, sometimes it’ll let the others down.

I feel the same as well. There is always someone that will take the job of set something up for girls only but then only 2 or 3 will come and obviously that’s not gonna continue. It lets us girls down who wanna go.

That’s my frustration. I’ve been going to the gym for 2 years and I’ve had about 7 different [female training] partners in that time. Thankfully I’m okay to do it on my own but I’m just saying sometimes females don’t have that same level of commitment as men do.

Some participants said that for cultural and religious reasons they would be more physically active if they could find women-only times for a wider variety of activities, such as weight-lifting and swimming. Instead, they felt that activities tend to be limited to “girly” activities, such as “legs, bums and tums”, “Pilates” and “Zumba”. On the other hand, some of the participants said that exercise engagement had led to new exercise opportunities: “from me playing football at the school league, I came to this and then it escalated…I got scouted for [professional football club]”.

Discussion of the theme. These findings show that within urban populations, culture strongly influences girls’ exercise participation. Providers are aware of this and in the current study, some providers have attenuated cultural barriers with success by creating inclusive community programs and increasing outreach efforts. These findings support previous literature, which suggests there is a need for culturally-appropriate and community-based interventions to tackle the more pronounced drop in exercise participation seen among girls from minority ethnic groups (Barr-Anderson et al., 2017). Future PA projects should aim to develop culturally-considered but inclusive programs through collaboration with beneficiaries. Although participants perceived fewer exercise opportunities for women than men in terms of activities on offer, and for women-only provision, they also felt that when women-only opportunities were available they are not fully utilised. This may be at least in part because exercise and sport are not prioritised by girls. Several studies have found that during adolescence girls’ priorities change and they have more competing priorities than boys (e.g. Whitehead & Biddle, 2008; Corr et al., 2018). These include social life, relationships, household responsibilities and time spent on physical appearance. These findings have implications for health promotion campaigns, as they can address these competing priorities while raising the profile of exercise in girls’ lives; a commendable example in this regard being the UK-wide *This Girl Can* campaign. For example, increasing the visibility of girls who attend school, have part-time jobs and are physically active. Also, interventions can incorporate an element of personal effectiveness where girls learn to balance their different commitments. Finally, it may also be useful for exercise organisations to seek input from participants in regards to the activities they offer and the activities participants would like.

#### **Safe spaces.** The providers identified a variety of factors associated with urbanisation that they felt influence girls’ participation. All four providers viewed their exercise programs as “gang prevention” or avenues to increase safety in the local community. They believe that urban environments exacerbate societal issues and girls may be attracted to exercise to seek safety through “belonging” or acquiring self-defence skills. One provider said that this is the main reason for the growth of their organisation:

… a young man I was mentoring got stabbed to death in North London and that’s when I decided to come on full time because I was like: actually, we are impacting these people. Erm, I think we could do a lot more you know if I came on full time.

Several providers stated that they target “gangs” and use “their tie” as a strategy to engage them. The providers felt that “deprivation” in densely populated urban areas was a significant cause of gang culture and exercise served as a “hook” to rehabilitate these young people. Two of the providers deliver martial arts and the other two advocated its efficacy in girls as they believe martial arts are “empowering” to girls because of difficult “life experiences”. One provider added, “the amount of schools that are asking for boxing now just says it all”. On the other hand, urbanisation can be a barrier to PA for girls. Providers identified the “locations of youth centres” and gang territories as deterrents. One provider stated:

where we are, it’s quite like, it’s a dead-end and it’s either side of a footpath and an underpass so if you don’t know the area you wouldn’t wanna go there…I think erm obviously there’s quite a few gangs around the area as well, people hear about that so that’s another barrier.

In the same vein, participants expressed a fear of violence in public places and on public transport. One participant described that a lack of safety limits her exercise opportunities. One girl said that to get to the exercise location she would take a bus but that bus was unsafe at night and therefore this limited her access to exercise. She would not take the bus because she and her friends try to avoid “putting [themselves] in danger”.

Besides physical spaces, both the participants and the providers identified online spaces an as influential factor in exercise participation. Participants stated that social media plays an important role in exercise promotion and engagement. Many participants said they spend “excessive time” on their phones and on social media, which is a “distraction” and leaves them with little time to be physically active. Several participants expressed that as a result of their engagement in the exercise program they had spent less time on social media. Partly because they had been busier due to exercise but also because they felt that much of the health and fitness content they were viewing was unrealistic and promoted “quick results” rather than promoting “patience” and realistic long-term health messages. The majority of the girls felt that motivational messages were more powerful coming from “normal women who are getting up and doing it” as they are more relatable and trustworthy. In spite of this, both the participants and providers felt that social media applications such as Snapchat and Instagram could be particularly useful to promote exercise among girls. Participants also stated that celebrities and social media influencers could do more on these platforms to promote realistic and healthy lifestyles:

Yeah usually they get surgery, then they’re talking about how much they exercise and you think “ugh come off it!” and it’s just fake.

I’d say celebrities in general [could promote health and fitness]…I think if you have that type of influence on people, you should try and use that platform to reach out to them and better their lives.

Discussion of the theme. These findings bring together the real and virtual environments of girls. Both providers and participants recognised that safety concerns that come with living in an urban environment affect exercise participation. Previous research also suggests environmental factors linked to urbanisation can discourage girls from being active (WHO, 2018). The lack of safe outdoor spaces was a barrier to physical activity identified in urban Bangladesh (Hasan, Rashid, Smith, Selim & Rasheed, 2020) urban Belgium (Heckle Deforche, van Dyck, de Bourdeaudhuij, Veitch & van Cauwenberg, 2016), urban India and urban Canada (Rajaraman, 2015). On the other hand, at least for some girls, fear of violence can encourage them to be active in self-defence type of exercise.

Regarding virtual environments, these findings show that girls use social media frequently and this can result in more sedentary time but that involvement in the program helped them reprioritise their time and exposed them to safe and real-world messaging about exercise. The findings of the current study provide an alternative narrative to girls’ social media engagement as they were conscious of making changes to the way they use and view social media content. Social media and technology-based interventions have become an area of interest in the literature. A review of 27 studies investigating the efficacy of interventions that use apps to improve diet, PA and sedentary behaviour concluded that, although the use of apps is promising and in three studies app usage was associated with improved health outcomes, there is only modest evidence that app-based interventions improve diet, PA and sedentary behaviour (Schoeppe et al., 2016). An app that tracks PA, has a health education element, and encourages a growth mind-set could be used alongside exercise delivery as an effective strategy to engage young women and girls. Organisations could exploit the use of social media apps by having a presence and posting appealing and informative content.

**Policy and Legislative**

At the policy level, the main sub-themes were *The devil is in the numbers* (with sub-themes funding bodies and local councils from providers’ perspective only), and *This Girl Can Campaign* (from participants’ perspective only).

**The devil is in the numbers.** The providers identified the local government and its strategy as influential in the issue of (in)activity of young women and girls. They identified them as having “clout” and influence to instigate partnerships between organisations and schools, and saw their involvement as a “catalyst” and cause for the growth of local programs for women and girls. One provider stated that being part of this project (*This Girl Can Lambeth*) commissioned by the local government provided them with valuable experience and they are “gonna continue [engagement of young women and girls] beyond the funding of this program”. Another provider stated:

when [the local government commissioner] sent ‘round an email about the girls league, because it came from the [local government], we got an instant response. Yeah, we got the buy-in then and now a lot of those girls come to our Saturday session and now we’ve got an actual football team out of it playing in a league. That’s all through this. The [local government has] got that clout.

These findings show that local councils can be instrumental in helping organisations engage young women and girls through dedicated funding and by facilitating networks. However, the providers felt the local council “didn’t do their research” in terms of choosing the charities involved, or effectively managing the partnering organisations. They also felt the council had no long-term plan for sustainability of exercise provision for girls. Rather, they thought the council lacked a long-term strategy and took the approach of “oh there’s a bit of money we’ll do a girls project”. Two providers stated:

It’s not a bad idea and that’s why we signed up to it because it’s a good thing but it’s just you know, the management of the whole thing hasn’t been great…I think getting buy-in from partners, in the beginning, is really key and not just buying into delivering a program, but buying in to working together and having a joint approach…it’s a partnership in name which is a shame because I think it could have had legs.

I think it would be nice that when this [project] finishes, something grows out of it. I think it would be a shame if it just (…) that’s the end of it, that was the 3 years, that was fun, see you later. I think [the local government] should take it on.

The providers also felt that similar to the local government, funding bodies are an instrumental element that indirectly impacts the participation of girls in exercise programs. In the *This Girl Can Lambeth* project the providers viewed Sport England as a “silent partner” who were valued because of their funding and the exposure they provided. They also felt, however, that there is a significant disparity between the funding body’s policies and what “goes on on the ground”. A provider stated:

Funders are what make these things happen ultimately, but the time scale needed to be bigger than three years…the age bracket should have been broken down across the three years and I would have started younger as well.

All the providers felt the project was driven by numbers rather than the quality of engagement, and they felt that without this pressure from the local government and funders “there could have been more positives”. For example, one provider stated:

In the first year, I felt like, it was just like “deliver this project, get the numbers” and then that was it. We wouldn’t engage with those people again, and actually, they wanted to engage with us… I’ve learnt that you can still get your numbers or whatever but the value of the sessions is more important.

The providers disagreed strongly with how funding bodies measure impact and participation, as they were passionate about engaging girls but felt the projects’ structure limited their impact. Two providers stated:

Then the other thing is measuring as well, it should be more than participation. I think participation is whack ‘cos you know I can go into a school every single day this week, between me and [coach X], and we can deliver to every single year group, a football session. At the end of the year I’ve delivered to 300,000 young people this year which sounds amazing but when we look at the impact, will those young people remember us this time next year? They probably won’t because we only came in for an hour. So measuring participation doesn’t (…) it’s not great… Measuring impact is more … it allows organisations to focus on delivery rather than on numbers, and when you take away that pressure to hit numbers people start doing quality and effective work.

I mean what is a success criteria…how am I ever going to measure regular participation because everyone measures it differently. London Sport they measure it six out of eight sessions. At the Mayor’s Office, they measure it as ten out of twelve sessions.

Discussion of the theme. The findings illustrate the benefits of local council involvement in the delivery of community exercise, but providers also highlighted the importance of skilful and purposeful project management indirectly impacting girls’ participation. Two reviews of community-wide interventions for increasing PA found that most interventions involved partnerships with local governments or non-governmental organisations (Baker et al., 2015; Hull et al., 2018) and utilised their platforms, networks, and funding to increase the reach and impact of their interventions (Baker et al., 2015). However, the effects reported across the studies were inconsistent, perhaps because they do not share a strategy for project implementation and sustainability. A recent article provides an extensive discussion on this topic along with recommendations for different stakeholders on how to best monitor sport for development (Whitley et al., 2020). The providers showed frustration at the lack of agreement between funding bodies and with how their funding rules hamper their provision, and therefore the engagement of girls. An article exploring four approaches to assessing the social impact of charitable organisations states that the reporting of measurements to multiple bodies adds to managerial activities and costs, which are unrelated to the direct delivering of services, and distract the charity from its core focus (Polonsky & Grau, 2011). They conclude, similarly to the providers, that collaborative development of evaluation criteria is needed. The findings of the current study also suggest that the timeframe and distribution of funding should be agreed upon between collaborative partners and reflect the scope of the project.

**This Girl Can.**All the participants were aware of the *This Girl Can* campaign, which had been running on TV and advertised outdoors in the UK (funded by National Lottery Fund) for 25 months at the time of data collection. When presented with adverts from the national campaign, they had very positive opinions of it, saying that it targets an important issue and portrays a “variety” of women “realistically”. The participants all felt that at least one of the adverts resonated with them due to the model, activity or messaging featured in the advert. However, they reiterated the earlier point that less attention should be paid to how women and girls look and the sexualisation of the female body. For example, participants stated:

[referring to the ‘hot and not bothered’ advert] I really liked it because her facial expression is very intense and very powerful and I was very motivated by it because she’s into what she’s doing and she doesn’t care who’s around her. I have to say this is the opposite to that [referring to the ‘my game face has lipstick on it’ advert] because this one says ‘hot and not bothered’ whilst the other one is more to do with looking good whilst exercising. She genuinely doesn’t care how she looks, she’s wearing a shirt with burgers on it which I found quite funny actually. She’s got her earphones in and doesn’t care who’s around her, and that’s what I found very powerful and motivating.

It says ‘I swim because I love my body, not because I hate it I like this one because I feel like it promotes a self-love and it’s confidence-boosting because a swimmers’ body especially looks a certain way, has to have broad shoulders and slim and very fit. This ad is telling you that you don’t have to look like that to swim, you can swim regardless and don’t have to care what people think.

That’s what I was gonna say because people have insecurities as well. Like some people put off going to the gym because they’re not happy with their bodies but if you don’t go to the gym, then how will you then get a body that you like? So I think this is the strongest message and in contrast to this one [referring to the ‘I kick balls. Deal with it’ advert], it promotes self-love as opposed to trying to prove a point to the other gender.

Discussion of the theme. These findings show that adverts may resonate more strongly and be more motivating when girls find them relatable, realistic and empowering. Previous research by Gallagher (2015) investigated the effects of fitness advertising on girls and found that, regardless of the model featured in the advert, a realistic advert that tells a relatable story generates the most positive response from girls. Another study by Krane and colleagues (2011) found that girl athletes preferred images of women college athletes that looked authentic and relatable, although there was a variation on which images represented this. In this case, the *This Girl Can* campaign successfully represented a variety of women that can appeal to different women and girls. Future campaigns should continue to include, amongst other things, diverse bodies, ages, cultures, abilities, activities and messaging to ensure that at least one of the images will resonate with an individual young woman or girl.

**General discussion**

Overall, the results of this study show that the perspectives of providers on what factors contribute to exercise engagement among young women and girls are not always aligned with the perspectives of the young women and girls themselves, especially at the intrapersonal and interpersonal level. At higher levels of the ecological model, results provide good arguments for better collaboration between exercise providers and other stakeholders such as schools, councils, and funding bodies for sustainable exercise provision that impacts young women and girls. In the previous section, the results and discussion were organised by levels but we also found that some themes ran across levels. Here we highlight and discuss two main take-home messages from prominent themes that run across different levels of the ecological model.

First, young women and girls want to develop their sporting skills and competency. This should not be surprising given the innate drive of children to acquire motor skills (Barela, 2013; Malina, 2014; Stodden, Goodway, Langendorfer, Roberton, Rudisill, Garcia & Garcia, 2008) and yet the providers did not identify it as an important motivator. Skill development was evident in the young women and girls’ narrative across levels: as a personal motivator, as a preference for competent coaches, as a problem in school-based PE sessions, and also as serving a safety purpose in urban environments (martial-arts). A recent study has found that regardless of gender, age or expertise level, developing skill competency was the main motivating factor for adherence to taekwondo sessions (Faria, Ribeiro, Souza, Rennó & Albuquerque, 2019). Likewise, competency (or perceived lack thereof) was a principal theme at the core of young women’s participation in sport (Clark, 2012). According to the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), competence is a basic psychological need that is enhanced by optimal challenge and positive feedback. This speaks to the participants’ views that they want coaches who know how to push them and motivate them. On the other hand, feelings of competence are undermined by excessive challenge which speaks to the tensions identified regarding mixed-gender sessions and unfair competition. As the providers did not identify skill as an important factor for girls the question arises of whether they would have identified skill as an important motivator for boys. Instead of skill, providers viewed body image as an influential factor in line with an extensive body of literature (e.g. Daniels & Leaper, 2006; Fox, 2000; Hausenblas, Cook, & Chittester, 2008; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011), but the girls did not. There are three possible reasons for this contrast. First, it is possible that body image was a sensitive topic for participants which affected disclosure within the focus group setting (Sparkes & Smith, 2013) but we think this is unlikely because other sensitive topics were discussed (e.g., concerns and difficulties within romantic and familial relationships). Second, it is also important to consider that the prevalence of feminist movements on popular media platforms aimed at young women and girls may have made it difficult to speak against the now dominant narrative of body positivity (Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John & Slater, 2019). Third, it is possible that excessive concern with body image is still an issue with adult women but is outdated in young women and girls. Participants’ views were aligned with recent research related to women empowerment and body positivity (e.g. Fardouly & Rapee, 2019; Tiggemann & Zinoviev, 2019). For instance, when discussing the impact of social media and the *This Girl Can* campaign, the overarching opinion was that real bodies are the best bodies. It is possible that the campaign itself, which was well-known and well-received among the participants, has contributed to a shift in their perceptions (Mulgrew, McCulloch, Farren, Prichard & Lim, 2018). The misalignment between participants’ views and the providers’ preconceptions about body image as an important influence, may mean that providers are using insufficient motivation strategies and inadvertently perpetuating an unwelcome emphasis on the appearance of women’s bodies rather than on physical competency and psychological wellness.

The emphasis placed by the funding and governing bodies on reporting numbers rather than quality and longevity of engagement when evaluating the success of community-based projects negatively impacted the participants in this study both directly and indirectly. The focus on engaging high numbers of girls encourages a culture of short-term interventions at the organisational level. For the providers, this was a reoccurring problem. Many funding bodies request ‘throughput’ as a measure of impact. This pressurises providers into running mainstream activities, target groups that are easier to reach, and also run one-off day events to capture large numbers of participants with whom they have no further engagement. The implications are that the reported numbers are not indicative of adherence, long-term behaviour change, wellbeing, or impact on health. Importantly, our results highlighted that lower participation levels in young women and girls often results in fewer women-only opportunities, fewer resources in terms of kit and equipment, and less exposure in terms of marketing and sponsorship. The emphasis on large numbers of engagement imposed at the policy and legislative level defines the provision and resource allocation, and therefore negatively affects young women and girls’ experiences of exercise. These negative effects may be exacerbated for ethnic minority groups. Since certain aspects of impact are not effectively captured via the established reporting approaches, funding opportunities for culturally-considerate projects may be affected and this may discourage providers to develop and deliver them.

As with all research, this study has several limitations. First, most participants in the focus groups were successfully engaged in exercise sessions and their views may not be shared by other young women and girls who are not actively engaged in exercise. Their views may also not be shared by women and girls living in suburbs or rural areas as differences in terms of exercise provision, safety concerns, and ethnic diversity may all contribute to different barriers and motivators. Second, the providers knew each other and met on a few occasions as part of the *TGCL* project. This means they had exchanged views on some of the topics they mentioned in the interviews, namely about measuring impact. This means that the providers may have been influenced by each other, although issues around funding and impact would certainly have arisen regardless. Finally, previous studies have rarely explored the thoughts of those who influence the PA participation of young women and girls. One study did this by studying the case of a 35 year old woman (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). The authors explored the perspectives of a woman, her husband and her activity partner. This strategy can provide a rounded glimpse into the social and cultural discourses that construct the woman’s identity (McGannon & Schinke) or, as we did in the present study, explore how different stakeholders’ beliefs and experiences may influence the PA participation of young women in girls.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

In conclusion, the present findings identified an array of factors spanning across the levels of the ecological model that influence exercise participation in urban-dwelling young women and girls. Synthesising the views of participants and providers of exercise allowed a better understanding of these factors and gave an insight into both the contrasting and additive nature of their perspectives. We suggest that consideration of both views in future interventions may improve exercise delivery and sustained engagement with physical activity and exercise. Important factors to consider include: balancing personal and skill development with enjoyment, the role of boys, the competency of instructors, school work and school involvement in exercise provision, safety in urban communities, and sustainability of funded provision. Table 1 compiles a series of recommendations derived from the results of this study, which can inform stakeholders on different level to ensure that *Girls* indeed *Can*.

*Table 1.* Practical recommendations at each level of the ecological model to increase participation of young women and girls in exercise.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Ecological level** | **Practical recommendation** |
| **Intrapersonal** | Both physical health and psychological well-being should be considered in exercise intervention development |
| Exercise sessions should be enjoyable and progressive |
| Participants ability, input and goals should influence delivery of interventions |
| **Interpersonal** | Coaches should be well-trained, relatable and diverse, able to develop skills and mentor |
| Boys’ and Girls’ exercise groups should be encouraged to support each other |
| Mixed-gender exercise sessions should focus on skill development and fun (not competition) |
| **Organisational** | To help with excessive (sedentary) homework, schools could assign active homework and encourage active recess time |
| Boys’ and Girls’ groups should be treated fairly within exercise settings and both men and women role models should be visible |
| To help improve experiences with PE, PE teachers could be up-skilled, and PE could be supplemented with exercise interventions with community-based exit routes |
| **Environmental** | Exercise opportunities for young women and girls should be increased and diversified |
| Social media and mobile phone apps should be used to engage, educate, and retain young women and girls in exercise |
| Location, culture and physical infrastructure should be considered to facilitate the successful implementation of exercise interventions |
| **Policy and legislative** | Project evaluation criteria should be developed collaboratively and include both quantitative impact and case studies |
| Marketing campaigns for increased PA and exercise should be representative and inclusive, and focus on the psychological and physical benefits of being active |
| Agents at the policy and legislation level should collaborate closely with agents at other levels to effectively manage strategies, funding and resources |

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