



Girls feeling good at school: School gender environment, internalization and awareness of socio-cultural attitudes associations with self-esteem in adolescent girls



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ABSTRACT

As society continues to advocate an unrealistically thin body shape, awareness and internalization of appearance and its consequent impact upon self-esteem has become increasingly of concern, particularly in adolescent girls. School gender environment may influence these factors, but remains largely unexplored. This study aimed to assess differences between two different school environments in appearance attitudes, social influences and associations with self-esteem. Two hundred and twelve girls ($M = 13.8$ years) attending either a single-sex or co-educational school completed measures on socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance, social support and self-esteem. Though marginal differences between school environments were found, significantly higher internalization was reported among girls at the co-educational school. School environment moderated relations between internalization and self-esteem such that girls in co-educational environments had poorer self-esteem stemming from greater internalization. Thus, in a single-sex school environment, protective factors may attenuate negative associations between socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance and self-esteem in adolescent girls.

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Introduction

Self-esteem declines during adolescence, with research suggesting that changes in body composition contribute to this considerable reduction (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005). Self-esteem is related to thoughts and feelings about one's body (Ata et al., 2007), which can contribute to poorer mental and physical health (Trzesniewski et al., 2006), and multiple factors can lead to this reduction in self-esteem. Adolescence is a critical time for forming views about oneself while experiencing peer evaluation and involvement, which has the likelihood of shaping self-esteem.

Everyday conversations with peers and frequent media exposure form a context for discussing and interpreting information associated with appearance and body shape (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004). Adolescent girls with greater internalization of media ideals report greater appearance conversations with friends and more peer appearance criticism when exposed to magazines with an emphasis on appearance (Jones et al., 2004). Evidence consistently

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suggests internalization of thin ideals predict a drive for thinness and high body dissatisfaction (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006; Smolak, Levine, & Thompson, 2001) with exposure to the media and internalization being highly salient mechanisms supporting body image concerns and subsequently overall self-esteem (Grabe et al., 2008). As such, a study in girls aged 11–16-years found experimental exposure to either ultra-thin or average size magazine models lowered body image satisfaction and consequently self-esteem (Clay et al., 2005). Thus, perceptions of physical appearance and any degree of internalization impacting upon these perceptions is likely important for the development of self-confidence and self-esteem.

With increased exposure to unrealistically thin ideals portrayed in the media, most adolescent girls have an awareness of these thin ideals, but not all girls internalize them by attempting to conform to these ideals. However, there is the suggestion that those adolescent girls experiencing low self-esteem more often internalize the sociocultural ideal of thinness. The more these images are internalized, the greater the likelihood of social comparison (Fernandez & Pritchard, 2012), even despite the realization that these images are unattainable. A recent study showed how internalization precedes appearance comparison, which leads to greater body dissatisfaction (Rodgers, McLean, & Paxton, 2015). Given the association with body dissatisfaction, internalization could also be argued to impact independently upon other important psychological outcomes, specifically self-esteem.

Previous research has already identified peers to be an important determinant in the development of appearance concerns (Ferguson, Winegard, & Winegard, 2011) and low self-esteem (Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Peers can be influential, providing both positive and negative effects on how a female feels about her body (Steinberg & Sheffield-Morris, 2001) and on her overall self-esteem. Throughout adolescence, peers become more important, with reliance, support and need for approval increasing during this period (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005). Not having support or acceptance from friends has been associated with body dissatisfaction (Ata et al., 2007) and low self-esteem (Shroff & Thompson, 2006), as it perpetuates girls' belief that they would become more popular if thinner (Oliver & Thelen, 1996).

Friendship groups often share similar attitudes towards the importance of appearance and often discuss dieting and weight issues with friends (Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999); with these conversations reinforcing the notion that appearance is important (Jones et al., 2004). Friendship groups can share similar feelings of mood and self-esteem (Paxton et al., 1999). Likewise, peer conversations contribute to prominent social comparisons in adolescents (Jones et al., 2004). It is not unexpected that girls who make comparisons with their peers and have weight-related conversations are more likely to experience lower self-esteem and poorer body dissatisfaction (Ata et al., 2007), as a consequence of listening to others' comments about being dissatisfied with their own bodies (Helfert & Warschburger, 2011). However, it is less likely that those adolescent girls who feel accepted by their peers will try to conform to the thin ideal (Bearman et al., 2006).

As a consequence, peer pressure to conform to the thin-ideal stereotype depicted by the media can therefore occur in one of two ways; either directly through methods, such as teasing and/or criticisms of weight and appearance, or indirectly by a friend voicing concerns over their own appearance (Ferguson et al., 2011). Research and meta-analyses that have examined weight-related teasing have shown a positive longitudinal relationship with self-esteem (Menzel et al., 2010); such that those who are teased are more likely to diet and experience poorer body image (Clark & Tiggemann, 2007).

School can be a place for girls to develop, gain confidence and improve self-esteem, not only through learning, but also through developing friendships. Schools and peers, as well as parents, have been found to influence a child's self-esteem (Strange, Neuenschwander, & Dauer, 2005). However, it is argued that girls maintain more negative attitudes and behaviors towards each other, and thus in an all-girl environment this could impact further on appearance concerns, especially for those with low confidence and self-esteem (Delfabbro, Winefield, Anderson, & Winefield, 2011). Alternatively, a single-sex school may have benefit, as girls in co-educational schools tend to exhibit a greater focus on boys and potentially greater social comparison. What is not clear is the strength and direction of these associations within different school environments.

The school gender environment could be influential in girls managing internalization and self-esteem issues, but it is yet unclear the extent to which this environment impacts upon these relationships. Schools are thought to be places where a culture focusing on physical appearance and weight consciousness may exist and that single-sex schools in particular may manifest such a culture (Dyer & Tiggemann, 1996). Research conducted among 261 Australian girls (mean age 16.1 years) from two private single-sex and two co-educational schools identified that girls from both school environments wished to obtain a thinner body, but what drove that desire for thinness appeared to differ between the schools (Tiggemann, 2001). Specifically, in the single-sex school, more importance was given to intelligence and professional success as key reasons for the drive for thinness (Tiggemann, 2001). This importance on intelligence and professional success are likely to be key determinants relevant not only to appearance concerns, but importantly play a likely role in girls' global self-esteem.

Broadly, it is recognized that appearance concerns are an increasing issue among adolescents (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001) with potential to impact upon global self-esteem. However, the school environment has not been fully investigated in relation to self-esteem in schools with different gender make-up. It may be that factors such as social support may be stronger in the single-sex schools and are likely to predict greater self-esteem. One study found no effect of school type on associations between appearance concerns and self-esteem in girls, but there was no accounting for negative sociocultural influences (awareness of socio-cultural attitudes, internalization) or for other positive psychological factors (social support) potentially associated with increasing girls' self-esteem within the context of the school environments (Delfabbro et al., 2011). Furthermore, girls are influenced most by similar others, in that the weight loss practices of an over-weight girl are primarily related to weight loss practices of their over-weight peers (Mueller, Pearson, Muller, Frank, & Turner, 2010). Yet despite the potential influence of school environment on appearance and weight concerns, particularly as argued may be present in

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