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Who thinks I need a perfect body? Perceptions and internal dialogue among adolescents about their bodies

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## Abstract

*Objective:* The main aim of this study was to provide a detailed examination of the nature of the messages that adolescent boys and girls receive about their body. *Method:* Forty adolescent boys and 40 adolescent girls participated in an in-depth interview to gain an understanding of the range of potential ‘sources’ of body-related messages. *Results:* Messages were organized around the source of these messages (self, mother, father, brother, sister, female friends, male friends, media). There were consistent gender differences in the way that adolescents received and interpreted messages about their bodies, with girls overall receiving more positive and negative messages than boys. Boys reported receiving virtually no negative messages from most people. *Discussion:* The content of internal dialogue among adolescents revealed that messages about the body could be interpreted, distorted and deflected. The implications of these findings for preventing body image related problems and disordered eating among adolescents are discussed.

**Key words:** Adolescents, Body Image, Gender, Qualitative, Social Cultural

Most research examining sociocultural influences on body image has been on girls, with little empirical study of these influences on boys. The literature consistently demonstrates that girls are socialized to strive for a slim body (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001a; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001b; Ricciardelli & McCabe 2001; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986). In contrast, the ideal body for boys is that of a lean muscular body (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; Furnham & Calnan, 1998; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001a; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). This paper is concerned with conducting a detailed evaluation of the nature of the messages received by adolescent boys and girls about their bodies from various sociocultural agents (e.g., parents, peers, media). Additionally, the paper examines the way messages are interpreted, including the internal dialogue associated with such messages.

Adolescent girls experience high levels of body dissatisfaction, with studies suggesting that as many as 90% want to reduce the size of their body (Keel, Fulkerson, & Leon, 1997). In contrast, boys are about equally divided between wanting to have a smaller or larger body, and about one third of adolescent boys do not appear to be dissatisfied with their body (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001a; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Falkner, Beuhring, & Resnick, 1999). However, the above studies have used standardized scales to gather these data. The deeper meanings that adolescent boys and girls attribute to their bodies, and how they process the messages they receive, has not been adequately investigated. In order to treat and prevent distorted body images among young people, it is important to understand not only the level of body dissatisfaction among adolescents, but also the way boys and girls variously give meaning to their bodies.

Several studies have highlighted the effects of sociocultural influences on body image for adolescent girls (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Stice, 1994; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999;

Wertheim, Paxton, Schultz, & Muir, 1997). In particular, mothers have consistently been found to act as social reinforcers and role models for attitudes towards body image among adolescent girls. Pike and Rodin (1991) demonstrated that both modeling and encouragement from mothers influenced body image and eating behaviors. Perceived pressure from mothers to lose weight has been shown to predict body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). In contrast, the role of fathers in relation to body dissatisfaction for girls has received mixed results, with some studies indicating that they do not appear to have a major influence on body dissatisfaction (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001), whereas others suggest that fathers transmit important messages to adolescent girls about their bodies (Dixon, Adair, & O'Connor, 1996; Keel, Heatherton, Harnden, & Hornig, 1997; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Thelen & Cormier, 1995). Studies have demonstrated that influences from same-sex peers have a major influence on body image for adolescent girls (Benedikt, Wertheim, & Love, 1998), although when other sociocultural influences are considered in the analysis, this influence does not always reach significance (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Ricciardelli, McCabe, and Banfield (2000) found that adolescent boys indicated that the messages they received from their peers and the media made them feel satisfied with their body.

The mass media is also reported to be an important sociocultural influence on body image among adolescent girls (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). For adolescent girls, the media transmits these messages by almost exclusively depicting role models with slender bodies who are rewarded for attaining the thin ideal body (Grogan & Wainwright, 1996; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Wertheim Paxton, Schultz, & Muir, 1997). Likewise, McCabe and Ricciardelli (2003) demonstrated that perceived pressure from the media to lose weight was an important predictor of body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls.

The number of studies that have examined the sources of influence (e.g., parents, peers, media) as well as their mechanism of influence (e.g., teasing, encouragement to change body shape, modelling) on body image among adolescent boys are substantially more limited than those that have examined these relationships among girls (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004). It has been suggested that boys may be less influenced by sociocultural pressures than girls (Andersen & Holman, 1997; Steen, Wadden, Foster, & Andersen, 1996). However, recent studies suggest that both mothers (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001a; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001) and fathers (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001) influence body image among adolescent boys. The few studies that have examined the influence of same-sex and opposite-sex peers on body image among adolescent boys suggest that they play a limited role in predicting levels of body dissatisfaction (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000).

As for the other sociocultural influences, the impact of messages from the media on body dissatisfaction among boys has been neglected. Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of the media in shaping attitudes toward the body held by adolescent girls. The media is likely to foster adolescent girls' engaging in social comparison, i.e., comparing their bodies to others. For example, Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, and Muir (1997) interviewed 30 adolescent girls and found that magazine articles and fashions were the strongest factors on the pressure to be thin. Many of the girls indicated that they felt fat, which is consistent with Nechter's (2000) findings in relation to the prevalence of fat talk among adolescent girls. Tiggemann, Gardener, and Slater (2000) also found in a interview study of 67 adolescent girls that media messages were reported as exerting the strongest pressure on participants to be thin.

There has been an increasing trend for male bodies to be featured in the most popularly read male magazines and there has also been a rise in the number of muscular male images

depicted in recent films (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). This would suggest that the media is likely to be an increasing influence on boys' body image concerns. However, both Cusumano and Thompson (2001) and Smolak, Levine, and Thompson (2001) found that media influence was lower for young adolescent boys and less likely to predict body dissatisfaction. Further, Jones (2001) found that although adolescent boys were less likely to engage in social comparison than girls, boys compared their bodies to those of models/celebrities, and this social comparison was an important predictor of their body dissatisfaction. McCabe and Ricciardelli (2003) found that body image satisfaction among adolescent boys was predicted by media messages for boys to increase the size of their muscles. Ricciardelli and McCabe (2001) also demonstrated that messages from the media in relation to their muscles predicted levels of body dissatisfaction among boys, with the media having the greatest impact among boys with low self-esteem.

From the above literature it is clear that there is a need for further investigation of the sociocultural influences on the body image of both adolescent girls and boys. This literature demonstrates that messages from parents, peers and the media appear to impact in the body image of both adolescent boys and girls, but the specific mechanisms whereby they achieve this impact required more investigation. In particular, it is important to determine the specific nature of the messages that are received from each of the sociocultural influences, how these messages are interpreted (i.e., the meaning of these messages for the individual), and the internal dialogue that is associated with these messages (i.e., the implications of these messages in terms of what this means for their body image). This research is necessary to investigate the meaning of these messages for adolescent girls, and to provide a greater understanding of how these messages are received and interpreted among adolescent boys.

It was expected that more girls would receive messages about their bodies than boys, and that the messages for girls would primarily center on a thin ideal body, whereas the

messages for boys would center on the attainment of a muscular ideal. The specific nature of the analyses used to determine the nature of these messages is outlined below in the Method.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 40 adolescent girls (mean age = 15.78,  $SD = .77$ ) and 40 adolescent boys (mean age = 15.98,  $SD = .66$ ), who were enrolled in grades 7 to 9 in both public and private high schools. The mean Body mass Index (BMI) for the girls was 23.13 ( $SD = 3.67$ ), and the mean BMI for the boys was 22.49 ( $SD = 3.80$ ). Participants were about equally divided between those who attended three segregated and three coeducational schools, and they generally lived in middle class suburbs in Melbourne, Australia. The participants were primarily from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds.

### *Materials and Procedure*

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the University Human Research Ethics Committee. Active parental consent was obtained from all parents for their children to participate in the study. An initial group of 10 participants who had participated in one of our earlier surveys on body image (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001b) and volunteered to be involved in further research were recruited for the current study. The remainder of the sample was recruited using a snowball technique (Patton, 1990). That is, after participants had completed the interview, they were asked if any of their friends from school might be interested in participating in the study. The researcher followed up any nominated names to invited them to be involved in the current study, and so on. None of the 80 participants had been involved in any educational programs on body image or health risk behaviors associated with changing one's body.

All participants were involved in an individual interview, held in a private location of their choosing (e.g., home, office, coffee shop). Two interviewers who had completed

postgraduate training in interviewing techniques conducted all of the interviews. A female graduate student aged 22 years gathered the data with the girls, and a male graduate student aged 23 years gathered the data with the boys. It was expected that having younger, same gender interviewers gathering the data would lead to a greater level of rapport with the participants.

During the interview, participants discussed a broad range of issues about body image. A semi-structured interview schedule developed from scales used in our earlier studies (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001b; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000) was used to ensure that essential themes were thoroughly investigated. Questions were centred around body image and body change strategies, sources that may influence adolescents feelings about their body (parents, peers, media), as well as the positive and negative messages that adolescents received from their parents and friends and the media about their bodies. The interviewers asked predominantly open ended questions and later followed up with more directed questions where appropriate. Questions focused on body satisfaction (e.g., “How satisfied are you with your current weight? Would you like to change your weight?”), body importance (e.g., “How important to you are the size of your muscles?”), and sociocultural influences from mother, father, brother, sister, female friends, male friends and the media (e.g., “How often does your father say anything positive or negative about your body size or shape? What does he say?”). Each interview lasted no more than one hour. Participants were given a movie pass to compensate them for their time. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and double-checked for accuracy.

### *Analyses*

The data were analysed using principles of thematic analysis, that is, the process of identifying common themes woven throughout an entire data set (Layder, 1993). The

analyses was further shaped by general theories and empirical reports regarding the nature of the sociocultural influences and the way in which adolescents may interpret body related messages (Layder, 1993). The researchers immersed themselves in the data, by reading and actively discussing the content so that a coding protocol could be developed that would capture the emerging themes. Participants' responses were grouped under the broad headings used to interview the adolescents: body satisfaction, mothers, fathers, siblings, friends and the media. These areas were identified from our previous quantitative research as the central set of sociocultural sources. Where necessary, modifications were made to the coding protocol in order to ensure consistency and reliability in the coding process. Once the coding protocol was firm, each transcript was independently coded by one of the authors within the NUD-IST qualitative software environment. This software facilitated the retrieval and systematic analysis of individual themes and allowed the researchers to discover interactions between themes e.g., how themes differed according to gender. Finally, group analysis pointed to the importance of i) the different experiences of boys and girls, ii) the internal dialogue around body messages, as well as iii) the positive, negative and mixed nature of assessments from various sociocultural influences (mother, father, brothers, sisters, male friends, female friends, media).

## Results

The results are organised under the headings of body satisfaction, social influences, including mothers, fathers, siblings, friends and the media. Issues concerning the way messages are interpreted, such as internal dialogues are discussed where appropriate throughout the results. A summary of the number of boys and girls who received positive and negative messages from parents and peers is provided in Table 1. These frequencies are a general guide to the nature of the messages received from the sociocultural influences. However, the prime purpose of this paper was to explore the specific types of messages: that

is, the dialogue used, and the actual meaning of the messages for boys and girls. The quotes provided in the results illustrate the nature of this dialogue. These results are discussed below.

Pseudonyms have been used for each participant.

### *Body satisfaction*

*Girls:* Just over half ( $n = 25$ ) of the girls spoke about their bodies overall in a positive light, even though not all of their comments were positive. For the eight girls who admitted feeling negative about their bodies, the focus was on overall appearance, body image, body parts and weight.

“Pretty good, I don’t think about it all the time, I’m pretty happy with it.” (Meg)

“I know I am fat, but I like that, it doesn’t bother me, I can wear what I want to wear and I’ve got good friends.” (Danielle)

“When I’m not exercising I feel like a slob, feel really fat and piggy.” (Helen)

Respondents engaged in internal dialogues with themselves about their bodies. Frequently, such dialogues focused on comparisons with the bodies of others. In fact, nearly all girls ( $n = 36$ ) claimed that they compared their bodies with others, even though this did not necessarily lead to negative feelings about their body. While there were a range of people that girls made comparisons with, including self, sisters, models, and others (e.g., passers-by in the street), female friends were most often used for comparisons. Also, while there were a range of comparisons made in regards to body, body parts, and appearance, weight tended to be the most common point of comparison. Sometimes girls felt good after having compared themselves to someone else, but comparisons tended to make some girls feel unhappy. This was because girls tended to compare themselves to girls who they saw as more attractive or slimmer than themselves. It was difficult for girls to resist making social

comparisons even when they realised that such comparisons led to them feeling worse. Nevertheless, some girls did try to resist comparisons.

“If you are going out somewhere and you see someone who is all slim and attractive and I think why can’t I look like that? I tend to compare myself to more attractive people so I don’t feel good about myself when I compare.” (Hannah)

“I don’t like comparing myself to other people, you just end up annoying yourself or the other person.” (Kate)

“I don’t let it put me down, because I am quite happy the way I am. If I wasn’t happy I may find comparisons more depressing. I don’t keep it on my mind, I don’t let it make me too sad.” (Nicola)

*Boys:* Nearly all ( $n = 34$ ) of the boys talked about their overall body in a positive way. Statements such as ‘pretty good’ and ‘it’s alright’ were common. Eight boys expressed some dissatisfaction with their bodies, and a desire to put on bulk in terms of achieving better muscles. Weight and body parts were also mentioned by boys. A number of boys were actively trying to lose weight or otherwise shape their bodies ( $n = 10$ ).

“Well, my stomach I guess, that’s a bit of fat left to get off that. Otherwise I feel pretty good cause I try to keep in pretty good shape as much as I can.” (Luke)

“Ah, I try to keep it as good as it can be. I do work out at school a bit – couple of days a week. I do play a fair bit of sport – cricket and football, and yeah...it’s getting here – a bit lower than good, but getting there.” (Joe)

“Since about year seven I’ve been very conscious of it, ..heaps, about what other people were looking like, but now I’m a lot more happy with myself.” (John)

Just over half of the boys interviewed ( $n = 24$ ) talked about making comparisons in relation to their bodies. However, the internal dialogue mainly referred to comparisons made with oneself in the context of body control behaviors

(diet, sport, exercise and fitness). When the dialogue referred to comparisons made with others, these tended to be in regards to strength and size.

“I’m quite happy with the way I am, I suppose. I’m not under-muscly or anything. ...I’d like to get bigger and stronger and stuff, but I’m happy at how I am at the moment...Well, compared to all of my friends. Because I’m quite a bit stronger and bigger.” (James)

“I suppose that it’s good to be strong. I can easily get beaten at arm wrestles at school by friends and stuff. I don’t play much sport, so it [strength] doesn’t really have a great impact sort of thing.” (Lachlan)

“Out of most of the guys in class, I’m pretty big. They judge me about the third strongest, so that’s pretty good. And my muscles are quite tight, built up. I have abs underneath all the flab...so, yeah I like my muscles, they’re pretty good.” (Michael)

### *Mothers*

*Girls:* The majority of girls ( $n = 34$ ) talked about receiving positive messages from their mothers. Mothers tended to give general positive messages in relation to their daughters’ ‘overall appearance’. Many girls ( $n = 22$ ) talked about their mothers making comments about ‘looking good’ which was often linked to what they were wearing and their appearance. Only a minority of girls ( $n = 6$ ) cited specific comments from their mothers pertaining to body change strategies, and these were about weight, exercise, body parts and fitness. Overall, mothers’ comments reportedly made the girls feel better, and comments were perceived by most as both honest and encouraging. Nevertheless, these mothers were clearly making and passing on assessments about their daughter’s bodies.

“Because I know mum will be honest, when she says something positive it makes you feel heaps better than a friend telling you something.” (Jane)

“Mum generally comments on the overall appearance ‘You look really good today...that dress looks really nice’...generally positive comments.” (Emma)

A much smaller number ( $n = 12$ ) of girls reported receiving negative messages from their mothers. The negative messages were in relation to a range of categories including skin,

exercise, specific body parts, weight, diet and clothing. However, there were only a small number of negative comments in each of these more specific categories. Even though the comments were considered negative, they tended to be interpreted within a framework of support.

“Not really, if it’s negative it’s that she thinks I should be doing more exercise or maybe I shouldn’t buy things that don’t suit me, which is fine.” (Helen)

“If we are going shopping together and she doesn’t like the clothes she’ll just tell me. I guess it is her opinion. They are the comments I don’t enjoy.” (Hannah)

*Boys:* Less than half ( $n = 18$ ) the boys talked about receiving positive messages from their mothers. The emphasis of mothers’ comments tended to be less focused on body appearance and more about bodily functions e.g., exercise, sport, fitness and eating habits. Only a smaller number of comments were reported in relation to weight and muscle. Like girls, boys perceived their mothers’ comments as supportive and encouraging. There were only two boys who reported receiving negative messages about their bodies from their mothers, and these were quite indirect messages related to gait and exercise. Interestingly, even though some boys ( $n = 6$ ) thought their mothers to be ‘pretty’ influential in how they themselves view and use their bodies, others ( $n = 10$ ) were at pains to point out that their mothers were not influential.

“I don’t know. She encourages me in most things I do...she’s a fitness freak too. So if I wanted to go for a run tonight, she’d come out with me, but it’s raining, so we’ll go to the gym. And she tries to keep me healthy.” (John)

“She’ll comment on the size of my arms, saying they’re huge or something...and yeah, nothing bad that she says.” (James)

“She’s always going on about the way I slouch in chairs and I never sit up straight at the dinner table. The other thing was that I didn’t swing my arms when I walked, they used to just hang by my side.” (Josh)

## *Fathers*

*Girls:* Most girls reported receiving messages about their bodies from their fathers. The majority of girls ( $n = 30$ ) talked about receiving positive messages. Like comments made by mothers, fathers also tended to focus on ‘overall appearance’ and ‘looking good’. Comments from fathers were not as frequent as those from mothers, and some respondents talked about receiving positive messages but didn’t specify the nature of these comments.

“Pretty similar messages...like he says I’m beautiful more and he tells me that he loves me a lot.” (Catherine)

“The same as mum, if I say something about it, he’ll say ‘no you’re not fat, you’re skinny’.” (Kate)

A small number of girls ( $n = 10$ ) reported receiving negative messages from their fathers. The most frequent negative comments were in regards to weight, however, some comments referred to appearance, clothes and exercise. While negative comments from fathers could be hurtful for girls, such comments were not always processed in a straightforward way. For instance, negative comments from fathers could be interpreted by girls as jokes, be balanced with positive comments, or be downplayed.

“A few negative ones, but he is just joking around. Like he might say ‘you look ugly today’.” (Sue)

“Yeah, sometimes it’s negative, but then other times it is all ‘you look really nice’.” (Michelle)

“He comes across quite negative about it, he always wants me to be nice and toned and everything and be like the magazine girls.” (Rosemary)

*Boys:* Only a minority of boys ( $n = 10$ ) reported receiving any messages about their bodies from their fathers. Fathers’ comments tended to focus on functional aspects of the body, and were largely considered supportive. Only one boy, Matt, reported receiving negative messages from his father related to his body. Matt’s quote clearly shows how messages may be ‘read between the lines’, pointing to the ambiguity of some messages, and

the potential for the receiver to interpret messages in particular ways. Interestingly, more so than comments from mothers, most respondents did not believe that their fathers' messages actually had any influence on them.

“I think Dad would like me to be sporty – not that he’s ever been like that. This is an indirect message – an interpretation of comments my father has made.” (Matt)

“No, he’s pretty laid back about that sort of thing. No, he doesn’t really say that much. He showed me how to use dumbbells and he encouraged me. I think this is a positive influence. Otherwise, there were no messages concerning my body, diet, exercise or appearance.” (Michael)

### *Siblings*

*Girls:* Nearly half ( $n = 15$ ) of the girls reported receiving positive messages from their brothers. Again, these messages were about overall appearance and ‘looking good’. Some respondents ( $n = 6$ ) reported receiving positive messages, but did not specify the nature of the comments. A small number of girls ( $n = 4$ ) believed their brothers were hesitant and perhaps uncomfortable about giving positive messages. Some girls ( $n = 8$ ) reported receiving negative comments from their brothers, but brothers’ comments here tended to be associated with periods of tension, anger and ‘fights’ between siblings. Negative comments were associated with weight, clothes, body parts and attractiveness.

“It’s hard for my brother to give any positive messages, but if I do go out somewhere, like with friends for dinner or something, he’ll say ‘you look nice’.” (Kate)

“He’s straight to the point ‘yeah that looks good’ or ‘that doesn’t look good’. He gives me positive and negative comments...it’s more about what I’m wearing.” (Claire)

“When we were younger, he’d tell me I was fat and stuff. It stopped, as he got older. Doesn’t give positive messages.” (Collette)

Nearly half ( $n = 18$ ) of the girls reported receiving positive body assessments from their sisters. Many of the comments were related to overall appearance and looking good, which

was sometimes related to clothing. Nevertheless, some positive assessments were thought to be tinged with criticism.

“Positive, also like my mum, she makes the effort to say things to make me feel better about myself.” (Katherine)

““Oh that looks nice’, ‘that looks good on you’ but there is also the ‘come on, we’ve got to lose this fat’.” (Hayley)

Twelve girls reported receiving outright negative messages about their bodies from a sister, yet many could not pinpoint what the comments were in regards to. Of those who did cite specific comments, these were associated with clothing, attractiveness, and weight. As with negative comments from brothers, negative comments from sisters were associated with periods of rivalry between siblings.

“If I’m in a fight she’ll yell out ‘you’re fat’ but that’s because she’s a size 4.” (Tanya)

“She only says it when I think I look nice, so I’ll go and change. She doesn’t make comments about my body, it is about my clothes, she’ll say ‘You’ve got a big arse’. I don’t take it personally.” (Danielle)

*Boys:* There were virtually no body-related messages recalled by boys from brothers.

Two boys commented on receiving positive messages about their height and muscle, while one boy, Paul, interpreted a message from his brother about physical strength negatively.

“One brother is always pressuring me to go for a run, but that’s more for him than it is for me. The other brother is at the gym every day...he’ll say you’re weak, you need to be getting into the weights, but I just ignore that stuff.” (Paul)

“My older brother has complemented me on the appearance of my pectoral muscles. These comments alerted me to the appearance of my pecs, which I am happy with.” (Simon)

Only a small number ( $n = 4$ ) of boys reported receiving messages from sisters and these comments were all supportive and related to weight, muscle and self-image.

“My sister has mentioned my broad shoulders.” (Peter)

“My sister [18 yrs] she helps me a lot with my self-image. ...she tells me how to do my hair right which is good, because she knows what she is talking about...she’s like helping me to try and look more attractive and stuff.” (Tim)

### *Friends*

*Girls:* Nearly all ( $n = 37$ ) girls talked about receiving positive messages from female friends. Girls tended to make relatively specific comments about each others’ body image. Of the messages received, comments regarding appearance, overall body and weight were the most frequent. Other comments were made in regards to hair, body size, body parts, looking good, and clothing. Additionally, girls clearly understood this positive feedback as being influential. Messages from girlfriends could be mixed, and some girls picked up critical undertones in positive assessments, or derived critical assessments from jokes.

“Some of them say that I’m skinny – sometimes they say it in a negative way – if Ally (friend) and I are talking they’ll say ‘look at them standing there – they look like sticks’ and ‘oh I’m so jealous you’re so skinny’ and things like that, and it’s kind of like they’re holding it against us.” (Sally)

“They are probably the people that influence me the most out of everybody because they give both, positive and negative comments; sometimes it’s joking, but you still take it seriously.” (Kate)

Nearly half ( $n = 16$ ) of the girls reported receiving outright negative messages from female friends. A small number of these respondents ( $n = 6$ ) could not specify what these comments referred to. However, of those who did specify the content, weight and clothing were the most common themes. The quote from Michelle below points to the issue of the potential for receivers of messages to distort messages in negative ways, while Sarah’s quote points to a level of resiliency in coping with negative messages.

“They’re negative, but that is probably more because I’m not secure in who I am, rather than because they are actually thinking it.”  
(Michelle)

“When they put me down, at that time I think ‘oh no’, but then I think they don’t know me, not at all, and I’m fine. If they want to think that they can think it.” (Sarah)

The majority of girls ( $n = 32$ ) reported receiving positive messages from male friends. These comments were usually general comments about appearance/attractiveness and looking good. Nevertheless, it seemed that boys were not a highly trusted source of advice on how to look good.

“Positive ones, they don’t really comment on the clothes you are wearing or anything, because they are ignorant.” (Sarah)

“They don’t talk much about it, but they would say overall if you’re attractive. There’s more general messages coming from them rather than talking directly with them.” (Emma)

“There is one guy who is really good, he hates it when girls diet and he thinks they all look fine the way they are, and that’s really nice.” (Catherine)

Nearly half ( $n = 15$ ) of the girls reported receiving negative messages from male friends. Many of the respondents did not pin-point specifically the nature of the comments, but weight was the most frequently cited reason for negative messages. Other comments were made concerning appearance, clothes, and body. Again, the quote from Michelle indicates some level of resiliency for dealing with potentially negative messages, while the quote from Kate shows how messages could be interpreted in certain ways depending on the receiver.

“Because we have close friends – we just bag each other all the time – someone said I was a bit hippy, but it doesn’t bother me – I don’t know (why it doesn’t bother me).” (Michelle)

“We were on a camp and I was standing in the lunch queue with a friend I just met and he saw my sister and said ‘wow, you are so different’, implying she was way prettier.” (Kate)

*Boys:* Only a small number of boys ( $n = 9$ ) talked about receiving any messages from female friends about their bodies, and all messages were considered to be positive. The

messages received were exclusively about their body, and more specifically about their build or muscles.

“My female friends give me positive messages about my body. That I’m strong and that I’m a good build.” (John)

“Girls in school, they just call me ‘tank’ most of the time...their view mostly is pretty good. I’ve got facial hair, I’m the third person in my year to start shaving...and they just go ‘you’re a big person, you’re my big teddy bear’ – they say that a lot.” (Joe)

Only a minority of boys ( $n = 12$ ) reported receiving positive messages from male friends. The majority of these messages related to strength and muscle. A smaller number of boys ( $n = 6$ ) reported receiving negative messages from their male friends. The messages were exclusively associated with weight and muscle, and tended to be given in a joking or teasing manner.

“Yeah – all pretty positive. None of my friends are sort of really sports people... but yeah, they’re all pretty positive...like...we never really talk about it much. One of my friends, who is a very enthusiastic sort of guy said it was pretty good – my body and that kind of thing.” (Michael)

“I exchange insults and jokes with a group of friends, which have no effect on me. There is one particular person who teases and taunts me about my weight and fitness.” (Matt)

“Because I’ve got upper-body fat, I get called ‘tits’ a lot, stuff like that, but...mostly as a joking term. I mean some guys will try to mess with you and call you fat, but then they’ll, in the same sentence, like call you ‘tank’, because I’m so big.” (Joe)

### *Media*

*Girls:* Only a small number of girls ( $n = 11$ ), reported receiving any positive messages from the media, and these were in relation to food and diet and exercise. Slightly more than half of the girls ( $n = 23$ ) reported receiving negative messages from the media, and these were in relation to the ideal projected by the media and how that ideal made you want to reach that goal. Girls in the study who were overweight felt particularly bad about not conforming to the ideal.

“Positive messages do come out of ads, which display larger women, for example, the Hestia bra ads.” (Tammy)

“Could be positive for those who are overweight, but then it is negative because it says you are not going to go anywhere or get anything if you’re overweight.” (Nicole)

“They don’t normally have anyone above a size 10, it’s kind of saying ‘you should be this size’; they should be presenting different sizes.” (Jacqui)

A small number of female respondents ( $n = 9$ ) talked about trying to resist the messages from the media, and this was almost exclusively related to the understanding that the projected ideal was ‘unrealistic.’

“You see those little stick figures. Personally I think that is stupid and it doesn’t influence me. I don’t want to be that thin.” (Claire)

“I think they need to be more realistic – people take the media so seriously – I don’t pay much attention to it because I know it’s so exaggerated.” (Olivia)

*Boys:* In general, the boys in the study either did not report or detect messages generated by the media related to their bodies. Nevertheless, there was an awareness among some boys ( $n = 6$ ) that they were being targeted by the media.

“The media does affect the way I feel about my body. It makes me get the sense that I’m inadequate.” (Clinton)

“Negative, oh, it doesn’t really bother me.... I suppose it does influence you a bit, because it is basically all these beautiful people, it portrays what people are meant to be; other than that it doesn’t really affect me.” (Simon)

## Discussion

The results indicated that the internal dialogue among both girls and boys about their own bodies was fairly positive, although positive internal dialogue was more common for boys than for girls. Negative internal dialogue for girls primarily focused on appearance and weight, whereas for boys it focused on muscles. Most girls engaged in social comparisons with the primary target of this comparison being their female friends. Girls’ internal dialogue

generally led to comparing themselves negatively with others, particularly in relation to their attractiveness and weight. Nevertheless, some girls expressed an awareness of the problematic nature of making comparisons and attempted to resist making comparisons. Some girls were able to use internal dialogue to fend off even highly critical messages about their bodies. Boys were less likely to engage in social comparisons, but when this occurred, the internal dialogue focused on sport, fitness and size. The level of body dissatisfaction among girls was lower than that identified in previous research (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001a; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001b; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986; Keel, Fulkerson, & Leon, 1997). This may be due to the fact that if girls are given the opportunity to discuss their body image, they are more likely to challenge the automatic negative feelings they have about their body, and adopt a more positive approach. Clearly, this requires further research to determine whether or not this is the case. If so, this has implications for the design of intervention programs to address body image concerns among adolescent girls.

The results also indicated that although both boys and girls received messages which involved assessments about their bodies from parents, siblings and friends, the nature and frequency of these messages varied. While messages could be interpreted in 'positive' or 'negative' ways, they could not always clearly be categorised as such by adolescents. For instance, even positive messages could be interpreted as suggesting that the adolescent should modify their body, or carry a more hidden negative or critical message.

Consistently, across all of the sociocultural influences, the 'positive' messages received by girls focused on their appearance and looking good. Fewer boys than girls reported receiving positive messages, the person sending the messages was perceived to be somewhat uncomfortable in commenting on their bodies, and the messages generally centred on height, muscle, sport/exercise and fitness. Rather than making direct comments on the boys'

appearance, the dialogue frequently centred on the functionality of the boys' body, and so only indirectly on the appearance of the boys' body. This is an interesting difference in the messages received by boys and girls. Consistently most messages for boys focused on the performance of their body, whereas messages for girls focused primarily on appearance. This may be one of the reasons why adolescent girls are more likely to diet and adolescent boys are more likely to engage in strategies to increase muscles (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Clearly, more research needs to be conducted to more fully understand the implications of these different messages.

The themes for negative messages were consistent with those for positive messages. For girls, these focused on weight, clothes and attractiveness from all influences, whereas, when comments were made for boys, these focused on physical strength and performance in sport.

Girls were more likely to detect messages from the media, and these were more likely to be perceived to be negative rather than positive. A minority of girls also mentioned the need to resist messages from the media in order to maintain a more positive body image. The boys generally failed to detect messages from the media regarding their body, and the messages had little impact on their body image.

The overall findings of this study indicate that a large proportion of girls face a barrage of messages, both positive and negative, about their bodies, from a wide variety of sources. This result is consistent with most of the previous literature that indicates that girls detect messages about their bodies from parents, peers and the media (Smolak, Levine, & Thompson, 2001; Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater, 2000; Wertheim, Paxton, Schultz, & Muir, 1997). A smaller proportion of boys receive messages, and they primarily focus on functionality rather than appearances as shown in previous studies with adult males (Grogan & Richards, 2002). Interestingly, boys appear protected from receiving negative messages from all of these sources. There were only 13 total negative messages received by boys,

compared to 73 negative messages received by girls. One wonders if either boys do not pick up messages, or if there is some kind of collective social reluctance to comment on boys' appearance. This phenomenon relates to both positive and negative messages, as boys also report a lower level of positive messages than girls about their bodies (except from mothers who provide quite a high level of positive messages).

There are a number of possible explanations for these findings that require further research. Perhaps it is not acceptable for boys to admit that they are receiving messages about their body, they may not be detecting these messages, they may be reluctant to discuss their body, or the level of messages for boys may, in fact, be lower than the number of messages for girls. It is also not clear what influence the age of the researchers had on the response patterns for boys and girls. It is possible that some boys and girls may have difficulty discussing their body image with member of the same sex who are only about 8-10 years older than themselves.

Surprisingly, fathers provided very few messages to adolescent boys regarding their bodies. This is in contrast to previous research that suggests that both mothers and fathers provide feedback to adolescent boys about their body (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). It was not possible from the current study to determine if there were differences in the family relationships of boys who received messages as opposed to those with no messages from their father. Interestingly for boys, male friends provided some positive and negative messages, although these messages seem to be more about functionality rather than appearance. These findings extend previous research that showed that peers played a minimal role in influencing body image among adolescent boys (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003).

Brothers and sisters also played a limited role in shaping body image. The role was much stronger for girls than for boys, with negative messages from sisters to girls appearing

to be backhanded complements, so there was a mix of both positive and negative messages. Also, for both boys and girls, sisters' comments seem to be very focused on appearance and highly connected to body image concerns that are considered important for social success in peer groups. In fact, an examination of the overall messages from all the females suggested that girls were primarily focused on appearance, whereas boys were more focused on functionality. Adolescent boys focus on functionality has also been highlighted in previous studies (Grogan & Richards, 2002).

Overall, the boys and girls in this study seemed to use the messages that they received about their bodies to develop a relatively positive body image. This was particularly the case for boys. A large proportion of both boys and girls engaged in social comparisons. For boys, this frequently seemed to assist them to confirm the positive view they had of their body. Even if they perceived that their body did not conform to the media ideal, or was not as good as that of their friends, many appeared to accept this difference, and not regret the body that they had. Girls were more likely to evaluate their body negatively on the basis of these social comparisons. The level of insight into the nature and influence of sociocultural messages among boys and girls picked up in this study is encouraging and has not been highlighted in past studies. The findings also provide insights into how future body image programs could be shaped. Programs need to build on adolescents' current awareness of media messages and provide skills to assist young people interpret feedback from others and the media in a more positive light. Additional work needs to focus on teaching young girls cognitive behavioral strategies that place less importance on social comparisons.

### Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that a high proportion of girls receive messages about their bodies from a wide range of sources. This finding is consistent with previous findings in relations to the level of messages from mothers (Pike & Rodin, 1991), fathers (Dixon, Adair,

& O'Connor, 1996), female friends (Benedikt, Wertheim, & Love, 1998) and the media (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). Girls may be attuned to receive these messages, and so readily detect them from each of these sources. These messages are likely to put pressure on girls to conform to the ideal body endorsed by the media. However, it is interesting to note that the number of girls who received positive messages was substantially greater than the number who received negative messages, with many of the messages endorsing the current size and shape of the adolescent girls who participated in this study. Future research needs to target these as potential protective factors in longitudinal research, and in preventative work with young adolescents.

The findings also suggested that there was a collective social restriction on giving boys negative messages, which was really only broken by male peers in a joking or teasing manner. Primarily, these messages from male peers took the form of joking, but they may also comprise some aspects of bullying. The lower levels of messages regarding their bodies were consistent with previous research (Andersen & Holman, 1997; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000). However, few studies have examined the nature of the messages received by boys. The results may indicate either that there are fewer boys who receive messages (particularly negative messages), or that they are failing to detect the messages. Clearly, additional studies are needed to verify and further explore the nature of these messages as perceived and interpreted by boys.

While some adolescents can brush off comments, others appear to find it difficult to process the messages e.g., jokes which may or may not be taken seriously. Depending upon how they respond to the sociocultural messages, it may be difficult for many adolescents to develop a strong sense of self-worth. Early prevention programs that target young adolescents' body image concerns are needed before their concerns increase in frequency and severity (Levine & Smolak, 2001).

This is the first study to provide a comprehensive examination of the broad range of sociocultural messages and how they were interpreted by adolescent boys and girls. It is limited by the fact that it primarily sampled Anglosaxon adolescent boys and girls from middle class backgrounds. The generalizability of the themes identified in the current study need to be examined by sampling adolescents from a broader range of backgrounds. A particularly valuable finding from this study was that it provided information on the balance between the positive, negative and mixed nature of the messages from each of the sociocultural influences. These results need to be explored further, so that appropriate prevention and intervention programs can be designed for adolescents to prevent the development of body image concerns and associated health risk behaviors.

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Table 1

*Number of Boys and Girls Who Received Positive and Negative Messages*

Source of Message	Positive Messages		Negative Messages	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Mothers	18	34	2	12
Fathers	9	30	1	10
Brothers	2	15	1	8
Sisters	4	18	0	12
Female friends	9	37	0	16
Male friends	12	32	6	15
Media	0	11	3	23
Total	88	202	21	104