'What you look like is such a big factor': Girls' own reflections about the appearance culture in an all-girls' school

Renee N Carey
Murdoch University, Australia

Ngaire Donaghue
Murdoch University, Australia

Pia Broderick
Murdoch University, Australia

Abstract

High school is a key venue for the development and expression of body image concerns in adolescent girls. Researchers have begun to investigate the role of school-based 'appearance cultures' in magnifying the body image concerns of students. To date, however, no research has examined girls' experience as participants within these cultures, and thus the opportunity to learn how girls account for the development and maintenance of these cultures has been missed. In interviews with nine girls attending an all-girls' school, the existence of a strong 'appearance culture' in the school was identified as a major influence on the body image concerns of students. Girls talked about the ways in which appearance-focused conversations, dieting, and weight monitoring occurred as part of the everyday interaction with friends and peers at school. They also identified many ways in which their school attempted to address body image concerns, although these attempts were often portrayed as ineffective, if not counter-productive. These findings suggest that attempts to address the body image concerns of students will need to be sensitive to the lived reality of appearance cultures within schools.

Keywords

Corresponding author:
Renee N Carey, School of Psychology, Murdoch University, South Street, Murdoch, Western Australia 6150, Australia
Email: r.carey@murdoch.edu.au

Body image is the number one concern of Australian adolescent girls, according to a recent survey of 45,000 adolescents, ranking above drugs, family conflict, and suicide (Mission Australia, 2008). In the United States, up to 90% of white adolescent girls show some level of negative body image concern (Parker et al., 1995). That young women express such high levels of dissatisfaction and anxiety about their bodies is not surprising, given the relentlessness with which western cultural representations of girls and women emphasize the importance of desirability and attractiveness and, increasingly, equate beauty with extreme thinness (Jeffreys, 2005; Wolf, 1990). However, in addition to the features of the wider culture, aspects of the local environments that adolescent girls spend time in have also been found to have a strong influence on the development of body image concerns (Hutchinson and Rapee, 2007; Levine and Piran, 2004).

One environment that is likely to be particularly influential in this regard is the high school, given that school is a major socializing context and source of influence for young people (Dyer and Tiggemann, 1996; Heyward, 1995). Schools have been found to contribute to the formation of what Jones and colleagues (Jones et al., 2004) first referred to as 'appearance cultures', or cultures of weight consciousness, in which adolescent girls incorporate sociocultural standards for female beauty into their peer cultures (Clark and Tiggemann, 2006; Jones and Crawford, 2006). It has been suggested that the gender composition of a school may influence the formation of these appearance cultures (Shroff and Thompson, 2006), with one Australian study finding that all-girls' school students displayed more disordered eating symptoms and preferred a thinner figure than did coeducational students providing evidence for this (Dyer and Tiggemann, 1996). It might therefore be expected that single-sex schools, in particular, are likely sites for the formation of appearance cultures.

Before discussing the major features of school-based appearance cultures, it is worth taking a moment to note the potential redundancy of identifying a particular aspect of teenage girls' environment as involving an appearance culture. There is a very real sense in which contemporary western culture has so thoroughly saturated its representations of women (including teenage girls) with concerns about appearance and desirability that there may seem little point in singling out specific appearance cultures. Susan Bordo (Bordo, 1989, 1993), for instance, argues that body image concerns and disordered eating are characteristic manifestations, or crystallizations, of culture itself, and that they reproduce, rather than transform, the cultural environment that produces them.

Many feminist scholars have identified the systematic ways in which women and girls are taught to relate to themselves not only as agents but also as objects of the 'male gaze' and that their worth and potential for happiness is strongly bound up in their ability to be found desirable by men (e.g. Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Jeffreys, 2005). This is the central premise of objectification theory, which states that women's (and girls') bodies are treated as though existing for the use and pleasure of others (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Tylka and Hill, 2004). That is, female bodies are constantly objectified, regarded as objects to be looked at and evaluated

(Tiggemann and Kuring, 2004). Women and girls take on this observer's perspective, and consequently regard themselves as objects to be appraised on the basis of their appearance (Fredrickson et al., 1998). Although it is arguable whether this self-objectification involves an individual psychological internalization, as proposed by Frederickson et al., or can be understood as a realistic awareness of the value and contingencies associated with (non)conformity to appearance ideals in their environment, self-objectification places an unreasonable burden on women and girls as they go about their daily activities. Fredrickson and colleagues (1998), for example, found that young American women (but not men) who were experiencing self-objectification performed significantly worse on a maths test than those who were not, supporting the idea that self-objectification distracts from the performance of other activities. In addition, self-objectification may lead women to become preoccupied with their appearance, and to engage in habitual body monitoring whereby they compare themselves with an unattainable ideal and find themselves wanting (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997).

The 'thin-ideal' approximates ever narrowing standards for desirability in relation to body shape and size, youthfulness, and grooming practices, to name just a few criteria (Jeffreys, 2005). The standards represented by this ideal are sociohistorically specific, in that thinness and youthfulness, for example, are not inherently desirable, but rather they have been constituted as such within the current cultural climate (Malson and Ussher, 1996). However, despite the ubiquity of appearance-based messages and the massive exposure to the thin-ideal that accompanies and shapes western women's experiences, there are particular contexts in which this cultural backdrop is taken up more actively and in which engagement with and orientation to the values and standards of beauty and desirability are foregrounded. It is these sites of collective, active engagement with appearance ideals that are identified for closer examination as appearance cultures.

Appearance cultures are said to be made up of three basic elements, namely appearance conversations, peer appearance criticism (or teasing), and exposure to appearance-focused media (Jones et al., 2004). The ideal image of thinness that is the near-universal criteria for media-endorsed attractiveness in contemporary western societies is thus personalized and brought into the daily realm of those living within an appearance-focused culture through regular appearance-based conversation. Acquiescent aspiration to these ideals is then produced through monitoring of compliance and marking (through teasing or pointed comments) of deviations from the standard. Drawing on the insights of Foucault, many scholars have noted that regulatory systems are most successful when they can engage participants in self-policing, rather than relying on external enforcement of the values of the system (e.g. Rose, 1990). Appearance cultures would thus be expected to work mostly by promoting strong shared endorsement of the appearance ideal, and through continual attention to members' appearance. Such surveillance would then be expected to minimize any apparent coercion by producing self-policing subjectivity, and instead present members to each other as engaged in the freely chosen, 'fun' pursuit of desirability.

Substantial empirical support exists for the contribution of each of these elements to the formation of body image and weight concerns. For example, in an Australian study Clark and Tiggemann (2007) found the frequency of appearance conversations with friends to be directly related to body dissatisfaction and dieting, while a US study found appearance criticism to be associated with weight concerns and body dissatisfaction (Jackson et al., 2000). The negative effects of appearance criticism may also extend to vicarious situations, where people experience others being teased about their appearance, with Jones and Crawford (2006) finding vicarious appearance teasing to be associated with increased body dissatisfaction and the perception that appearance is important for peer acceptance in the United States. This may result from appearance being made especially salient by appearance criticism and conversations, increasing the importance that individuals place on their own appearance (Clark and Tiggemann, 2007).

As the third component of appearance cultures, the media, in its focus on appearance and beauty, brings the aspirational models of the fashion world directly into the school yard. Fashion and celebrity news magazines are regularly brought to school by high school students, and joint reading/looking at these magazines provides jumping-off points for conversations among friends (Clark and Tiggemann, 2006). In the US, girls who are more frequent readers of appearance magazines have been found to be more likely to belong to friendship groups that direct greater attention towards appearance (Jones et al., 2004). Thus, it seems that in forming appearance cultures, adolescents actively adopt appearance ideals gathered from appearance-focused media into their own appearance norms (Britton et al., 2006). These norms are then discussed and shared among peers, cementing their importance in the peer culture. The importance of appearance manifest in the peer culture may then reinforce and increase body image concern among adolescent girls (Dunkley et al., 2001) and, furthermore, may form the foundation for appearance orientation and appraisal in later life (Kvalem et al., 2006).

Although a number of quantitative studies have explored appearance cultures in adolescent girls, the existence of such cultures has typically been inferred from the attitudes and behaviours of girls in particular social contexts. Little research has explored girls' reflexive experience as participants within these cultures, and thus the opportunity to learn how girls account for the development and maintenance of these cultures, as well as their own reflections on the ways in which they are influenced by (and resist) these cultural pressures has, to date, been missed. In this study we interviewed high school girls and invited them to talk about the ways in which matters to do with bodies and appearance are incorporated into the day-to-day practices of school life, and to reflect on how they and others are affected by these practices. We thus aimed to explore the high school environment and its contribution to body image concerns from adolescent girls' own perspective, paying particular attention to the possible manifestations of an appearance culture.

Method

Participants

Participants were Year 10 students (aged 14–15) from a private all-girls' school in a large Australian city. This context was chosen as research suggests that body image concerns may be more pertinent in an all-girls' environment (e.g. Dyer and Tiggemann, 1996). Participants were recruited as part of a larger survey study, in which students were invited to indicate their interest in participating in an interview. Fourteen students did so, however two did not provide complete consent and were hence unable to participate, and a further three students could not be contacted. Thus, a total of nine girls were interviewed, all of whom were white Australians. All students have been assigned pseudonyms in the analysis that follows.

Materials and procedure

Each girl was interviewed individually by a young white Australian woman (the first author). The interviews used a semi-structured question guide designed for this study. Questions focused on definitions of disordered eating, the role of peer group factors, and the characteristics of participants' own friendship groups. For example, students were asked 'Can you think of any examples of social or peer group factors that may lead to problematic eating?' and 'How important would you say appearance is in your school?' The questions were presented in a logical sequence, with broad introductory questions opening the interview, and the more focused questions asked toward the end of the interview. This question sequence was designed to allow the students to become as comfortable with the question process as possible, and to encourage the girls to direct the discussion to areas that they considered particularly important; the order of questions varied slightly between interviews in order to accommodate the flow of conversation.

All interviews took place in a private room located in the school's administration building, and were completed within one hour. Informed consent was obtained from both students and their parents prior to the commencement of the interview. This study received ethics approval from the university ethics committee.

Analytic approach

The interviews were conducted with the aim of exploring the appearance culture within the school. We used a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), whereby major patterns within the data were identified, with the aim of examining what the girls had to say both about the extent to which appearance-based issues were important in their school and the particular ways in which they were manifest in

everyday school life. Although we had these specific questions in mind, we were interested in how the girls would respond to overt discussion of appearance related pressures at school – whether they would 'take up' these issues in the interviews, and whether we would see in their talk any efforts to negotiate wider cultural discourses about the importance of appearance to teenage girls and competing warnings about eating disorders and the 'obesity crisis' (e.g. Gard and Wright, 2005). Thus the analysis is informed by the initial questions and theoretical background that guided the development of the study – the themes did not simply 'emerge' from the data – but it also reports the specific manifestations of appearance culture that were discussed by our participants, about which we had no strong prior expectations.

All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed orthographically by the first author.

Analysis and discussion

The importance of the school environment in the development of an appearance culture

As we were particularly interested in the possible contribution of the school environment to body image and appearance concern, we asked students directly about the importance of appearance in their school. As can be seen in the extracts below, appearance was seen as 'definitely' important in this school:

> What you look like is such a big factor. (Emily)

> So like being skinny and, like what you look like is really important, especially at an all girls' school, and everyone just cares a lot about what they look like. (Ella)

> RC: Do you think that these factors are important . . . in the adolescent population?/S: Yeah I think it comes up in high school . . . once you hit high school it comes up a lot more and I think your weight is definitely an issue. (Sienna)

Attractiveness was consistently described by the girls as involving being 'skinny' and looking like the celebrities pictured in magazines:

> The ideal person who's like . . . tall and blonde and skinny and they have a good body and they're tanned. (Emily)

> Like they see it in a magazine and then that's like what everyone thinks you should be like. (Ava)

> That's . . . where the media comes in as well cos, you know, they want to look like the latest hot new celebrity. (Isabella)

RC: Let's think about abnormal or problematic eating then, what are some of the factors that you think might lead to those?/E: ... like I think with celebrities and things like that, when you see them in magazines it's kind of like, 'Oh I really want to look like her'. (Emily)

Fashion magazines were mentioned frequently as being a source of the 'looks' that girls would then discuss and dissect with their friends, and sometimes try to emulate. The taken-for-granted assumption that teenage girls will be highly familiar with the kinds of images contained in fashion magazines was noted by Isabella when talking about the display of magazines in the school library:

RC: I think you've mentioned the media a few times cos of magazine diets, do you wanna ...?/I: Um I guess even in our school library we have heaps of magazines up for display on the shelves and you can see them, the books are all on the shelves all packed so you see their spines but you look at all the fronts of the magazines ... hot new styles, hot new hairdos ... the latest diets ... all the models who are, you know, thinly built, size six, and I think that's probably quite prominent. (Isabella)

Concerns about appearance were taken up by the girls across the interviews primarily, although not exclusively, in terms of body size. Although possible concerns about facial features and hair were occasionally mentioned, discussions about attractiveness, and particularly efforts to *increase* attractiveness, were overwhelmingly focused on body size. The major way in which appearance concerns were seen to influence the girls and their peers was via the pressure to diet, although dieting itself was seen by some as 'normal':

RC: What comes to mind when you think of eating behaviour?/E: ... there's nothing really that I've noticed that is unusual, like everyone's pretty healthy but I guess lots of people talk about dieting heaps, that's so often talked about, and not eating to lose weight and stuff – like my friends are, have a modelling thing on this weekend, have to wear bathers, so they're like 'oh, I'm not gonna eat dinner all week', you know, stuff like that, and especially with summer, everyone's like, wants to diet and all that kind of stuff ... I guess that's quite normal'. (Ella)

It's generally people who are already like rather skinny or a normal weight that are doing the dieting ... like the more skinny ones who actually diet cos I guess they're like, they're in cliques and stuff./RC: Mm hmmm/S: And so like their whole clique goes on one basically. (Sienna)

Dieting was frequently portrayed as a group activity in the school, as something that friends do together in order to maintain their friendship and 'fit in':

Especially like the group of girls, like in our group, we'll go yeah, I'm ... doing a diet do you wanna diet with me, like yeah okay we'll diet together. (Emily)

RC: Can you think of any examples ... of social or peer group factors that might lead to that problematic eating?/S: Um well like a lot of the school diets, like, together so then it's like the pressure that everyone else is doing it and then you might sort of feel left out. (Sienna)

We can see from the extracts presented above that girls identified a major role for school friends and peers in creating pressure to achieve a certain body size and shape, contributing to the appearance culture apparent in the school. In particular, the 'group dieting' mentioned by several of the girls can be seen not only as a shared behaviour designed to allow each girl to lose weight, but also, perhaps, as a practice that displays a commitment to the shared ideal of thinness.

Even though a school-wide appearance culture was clearly identified by all participants, the girls were also quick to note that appearance and weight concerns were not evenly distributed across different friendship groups and cliques within the school. Different groups were seen to value appearance and weight to a greater extent than others – most notably, the 'popular' groups were seen to be particularly concerned with their appearance:

The more like popular kind of people are more careful about how ... they look ... they're really concerned about the way they look and they always want to impress, like, everybody else. (Charlotte)

It's all about social acceptance, about looking good. (Emily)

If 'looking good' equals peer acceptance, as Emily suggests, we can see how appearance (including body size) functions as a marker and a gatekeeper of social position. Girls inside and outside the popular cliques clearly identified certain 'appearance thresholds' for belonging to these groups, and maintaining relationships within the most popular groups was seen, at least by those outside the groups, as requiring both a certain level of attractiveness as well as displays of investment in attractiveness (such as group diets).

Policing the appearance culture: The role of weight gossip

In response to questions about whether weight teasing was something that happened in their school, most girls responded that it would be unusual for hurtful comments about weight to be made directly to a person. However, there was a clear sense that the weight of other girls was a regular topic of conversation in their absence:

I can't think of anyone that I know who's that nasty to go up to someone and say something that rude, but yeah, I think we do, we do definitely [gossip about weight behind people's backs] ... it's all about teenagers gossiping about each other. (Emily)

RC: I guess from what you've said you think weight teasing is important in your school?/S:...I think I guess some people behind their back could be getting teased...but then I guess if some people are a lot more self-conscious, then you try not to say stuff around them because you know they're uncomfortable with their weight so.../RC: So it works the other way. (Sienna)

RC: Do you think [weight teasing] is more...something that people come out and say or is it more subtle, behind your back?/C: It's more behind the back, you hear it from someone else that they said that. I mean, sometimes you get people who get in a fight and just say it or whatever, but, um, it's normally behind your back. (Chloe)

RC: Do you think that teasing is something that happens to your face or more behind your back?/A: Um well it's kind of like joking to your face, but they'll probably say it behind your back. (Ava)

These extracts reveal the routine nature of talk about weight among girls in this setting. Across the interviews, the girls clearly considered talking about others' weight as an obvious part of the general gossiping about friends and rivals that they saw as a natural activity among teenagers. Although direct comments about weight would only be made 'as a joke' or in the context of a fight, efforts to protect the feelings of individual girls were confined to making sure that comments about their weight were not made directly to them or in their hearing. That is, care was taken not to make hurtful comments directly – especially with friends who were known to be self-conscious about their weight. The overriding sense that weight and appearance are public matters that are obvious topics of conversation and gossip was not questioned by any of the girls interviewed.

The distinction between what can be said about others' weight to their faces compared to behind their backs reveals how the appearance culture allows weight surveillance (and the regulatory processes that ensue) to operate while maintaining interpersonal sensitivities:

Well no-one really gets teased directly about their weight, like they don't bully them and say it to their face, but they'll talk about it behind their back...which in a way is kind of worse...because you find out about it from someone else. (Olivia)

Like on MySpace, like these girls, just all these girls were putting about her being big, you know, like on their, and I think they did – I never actually read them but heard, like, from like, cos you hear about it anyway I think – it's like, that they had their groups or something, and so they said something, like, about her being too fat. (Sienna)

The monitoring of weight is thus hidden in plain sight. These extracts display the clear understanding that even though efforts would be made to spare girls

from the direct embarrassment of receiving negative comments to their faces, it was nonetheless inevitable that people would eventually learn what was being said about them. Thus, weight gossip can produce the surveillance that in turn reinforces the self-policing and self-regulation of one's body; and the 'sensitivity' of maintaining this discussion 'behind people's backs' allows this to be achieved while maintaining a plausible deniability against potential allegations that body concerns are being 'forced' onto girls. Even if a person never hears anything about her own weight, the awareness that weight is noticed and judged still prevails, reinforcing again the pervasiveness of the appearance culture and the potential for one's weight to have an important role in achieving and maintaining status within that culture.

Health concerns as legitimizing weight concerns

In addition to the potential for weight gossip to make people feel bad, girls also identified that awareness of the surveillance of weight could be a catalyst for problematic eating behaviour:

> When you've got other people around you, you know, gossiping about you, making you feel bad, then you kind of put that back on yourself and go 'Wait, is it true? Am I really that weight?', and then that's when you start to, like, change yourself ... you might start off saying 'Oh yeah, I'm just dieting because, you know, because, just healthy eating', and then it kind of becomes an obsession. (Emily)

This extract draws on a juxtaposition between a problematic over-concern with body image and a necessary concern with healthy eating and weight that was made frequently by the girls. Although students were aware that weight should not be 'obsessed' about, and that girls should not be affected by pressures regarding their weight, there was also a clear commitment to the belief that healthy eating and exercise are desirable and, indeed, necessary. In the extract below, Chloe responds to a question about how problematic body concerns and disordered eating could be addressed by saying:

> Let people know that they're fine the way they are and they don't have to change to be a certain way for anyone and just eat healthy and exercise.

However there was some acknowledgment that healthy eating could be taken to 'the extreme':

> RC: Can you think of any other social or peer group factors that might contribute ... ?/S: I guess like in school ... like you hear about having a healthy diet and I guess some people take it to the extreme. (Sienna)

Even so, the girls saw it as possible to lose weight in a healthy way, which they defined as not dieting:

> They don't need to diet . . . if everyone just ate healthy and you know did exercise and stuff they'd all be, we'd all be fine. (Charlotte)

Expressing concerns about 'health' (one's own or others') thus provides a legitimate way to maintain a focus on weight:

> I always watch what I eat because it's healthy . . . unhealthy eating is not just gonna make you fat it's just always bad for you. (Emily)

Although none of the girls interviewed directly took issue with the need to be healthy, Sienna did express some frustration with the way in which 'health' was automatically seen to be equated with thinness:

> . . . we have got to figure out what's actually right and what's wrong . . . I know it sucks but it's got, just try and get, there's different healthy, we just got to understand that everyone does have different body shapes and . . . not everyone's gonna be the same weight . . . but it's hard, cos there's this big thing.

It is notable throughout the interviews that the delicacy that often characterized talk about 'extreme' dieting and losing weight to be attractive was markedly absent in talk about eating and exercising in order to maintain a healthy weight. All of the girls were evidently aware of the potential for concerns about weight to be interpreted as evidence of problematic body image and, potentially, of an eating disorder, and were careful to manage this interpretation. However, it was clear across the interviews that controlling one's eating and exercising to be fit and healthy were seen as important, and as behaviour that should be actively promoted by the school and within friendship groups. In this way, concerns about 'health' provide a legitimate cover for the surveillance of body size that was a taken-for-granted aspect of the appearance culture in the school.

> My brother wants to be a nutritionist so he's always telling me and we're always eating healthy, and whenever I see people doing that, they'll be like 'Ninety-nine percent fat free', and I'll be like, 'Yeah, but look at the sugar levels'. . . (Emily)

> I guess like at the moment there's the obesity crisis, like, there's so much focus on like weight and stuff . . ./RC: Mm./S: . . . and people are put into like their categories, like, you're either like, fat, or you're acceptable. (Sienna)

The school's efforts to manage body image concerns

Many of the girls mentioned the school's current attempts to deal with and prevent students' negative body image concerns and potential disordered eating behaviours. During the interviews, the girls made reference to numerous body image and eating workshops and talks, as well as to discussion of these topics within classes. While praising the school for its curricular attention to these issues and active attempts to prevent and address body image concerns:

> The school's pretty good about it, we always have talks about things. (Emily)

these girls also saw some problems with the way this was approached by staff. For example, Isabella mentioned that an overwhelming focus on disorder rather than health was a potential downfall of the school's efforts:

> A big one is the way that the school focuses on eating disorders and while it's good to discuss them and talk about them, I think they also need to talk about healthy options...they need to find a balance...like I don't remember talking about healthy eating last year...but I remember talking about...bulimia and anorexia and that's what stayed in my mind.

Thus, the school's attempts to prevent negative body image concerns were seen by some to contribute to the appearance culture, by overly emphasizing disorders to the detriment of healthy living. In addition, some girls complained that the school did not provide them with enough information about the actual harms that can result from eating disorders, but simply relied on an assumption that extreme dieting was self-evidently bad:

> I think that definitely there could be more...like we did [it] at school and kind of like you get this never-ending thing about...like bad things that could happen but you don't get, like, the actual facts...there's not the same thing about like *how* it's bad for you... I think a lot of girls just think, like, that generally, like, there's nothing about the long term effects of dieting on your body. (Sienna)

The school's body image and eating disorders workshops were also criticized for being somewhat unrealistic and out of touch with the reality of the pressure experienced by girls to have 'a good body':

> But when we have the workshops that come around and they're like 'you're perfect the way you are', you know, 'you should find inner peace within yourself' and everything like that, most of the girls, we just sit there and, like, 'That's a load of crap'... they're saying 'Oh you're perfect', and all these things, um, 'People like you for what's on the inside', we know that's not true because the first impression is what you look like...and the good body has [something to do] with that ....You take things out of it [the workshops], you

know they're right, what they're saying is really like, 'Oh that's so true', but then you're just with your friends and you're like 'As if any of that actually was true!' (Lily)

The competing truths surrounding adolescent girls' bodies are clearly reflected in this extract. On the one hand, Lily identifies and appreciates the efforts of teachers and others to encourage girls to appreciate and accept themselves but, on the other, she seems quite frustrated at the failure of those delivering these hopeful messages to address the overwhelming message of her lived experience – that what you look like does matter.

Conclusions

The appearance culture was seen as a pervasive and important aspect of everyday life in this all-girls' school. The girls were all able to discuss at length a wide range of ways in which appearance and weight issues and ideals came up in their everyday contact with friends and peers at school. These girls saw appearance as '*definitely*' important in their school, and noted that this led to pressures to diet in order to '*fit in*'. Appearance and weight were seen to contribute to popularity, with '*looking good*' thought to equal peer acceptance. The appearance ideals reflected in fashion and celebrity news media were incorporated into the local appearance culture of the school through the widespread reading and sharing of magazines, and the presence of prominent displays of fashion magazines in the school's library seemed to provide a subtle endorsement by the school of the girls' interest and concern about their appearance. This echoes Clark and Tiggemann (2006) and Jones et al.'s (2004) findings that fashion magazines are a particularly potent carrier of western culture's appearance ideals into the everyday interactions and personal relationships of teenage girls. The notion that girls routinely evaluate their bodies and appearance via comparisons with celebrities as well as with peers was repeatedly mentioned.

Despite the clear sense that concern with appearance was a pervasive and salient feature of the school environment, differences between subgroups of students in the emphasis placed on weight and appearance were mentioned by all participants (in line with previous research, e.g. Hildebrandt et al., 2008). Differences in appearance-consciousness between groups were associated with their social status, with the popular groups seen as being particularly concerned with body size and appearance. This orientation by all the girls to the relationship between appearance concern and popularity bears out the claim that management of weight and appearance are key factors in achieving and maintaining social status for teenage girls (Lieberman et al., 2001). This was also reflected in the girls' discussion of weight teasing, where weight and appearance were seen as public matters and obvious topics of conversation. In order to avoid being gossiped about and losing social status, one needed to maintain their weight and appearance at an 'acceptable' level.

Thus, as has been found in previous quantitative research in both the United States and Australia, an appearance culture did seem to exist in this Australian school environment (e.g. Clark and Tiggemann, 2006; Jones and Crawford, 2006). The girls in this school were seen to incorporate and adapt the appearance ideals of mainstream western culture into their own peer culture, and these were then manifested via frequent talk about appearance, group dieting, weight monitoring, and weight gossip.

The girls' talk about eating, exercise, and body weight showed a clear acceptance of the pervasive contemporary view that body weight is simply the visual evidence of a person's lifestyle (e.g. Gard and Wright, 2005). As observed by Burns and Gavey (2004), current public health discourses construct a seamless equivalence between weight and health, and a corresponding requirement for people to maintain their body weight within an acceptable range as a basic aspect of self care. Burns and Gavey show how potentially harmful behaviours, such as obsessive attention to food and exercise, are rendered not only as unconcerning, but also as praiseworthy. This discourse was evident in our interviews where the girls talked matter-of-factly about the obvious need to be vigilant about eating the right foods and exercising in order to stay 'healthy'. Problem eating was portrayed either as taking this normal and reasonable concern 'to the extreme' (Sienna), or else as a failure to realize that dieting would be unnecessary if 'everyone just ate healthy and did exercise and stuff' (Charlotte).

Given the widespread acceptance of this view – that body weight is only a problem for those who fail to correctly manage their eating and exercise – it is not surprising that those who find that their bodies fail to correspond to their ideal seek to 'improve' their bodies through ever greater attention to and control over their eating and exercise. As Burns and Gavey (2004) note, the logic of the demanding, damaging, and sometimes dangerous practices that girls and women often engage in to produce compliant bodies is grounded, ironically, in the prevalent discourses of 'health'. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the necessity of eating and exercising to maintaining good health was taken as given by all the girls, there was also evidence that the girls could see through the apparent unconcern with aesthetics of the 'health' discourse and were aware of how it is available to be used as a cover for 'obsessive' diets undertaken in order to lose weight.

The school administration was also seen to be aware of and concerned about the appearance culture prevalent in this school, providing attempts to prevent negative body image concerns – although these programs were seen by some to be potentially counter-productive, by normalizing body image concern and reinforcing the appearance culture in the school. However, this is not to say that there is not a role for intervention programs. While addressing eating and body image issues from an individual perspective can be inadequate and perhaps even iatrogenic (Burns et al., 2009), programs which target the complex cultural context surrounding these issues are much more likely to be successful (Piran, 2001). The Body Image Wellbeing in Schools Education project is one such approach, encompassing efforts at the peer, staff, parent, curricular, policy, and community levels via six separate but

related streams (Burns et al., 2009). This approach was developed in response to previous failed attempts at individually-focused interventions, and recognizes that schools may be sites for the reproduction of gendered ideals surrounding body size and shape. Accordingly, Piran's (2001) Body Logic Program used a participatory approach to target contextual factors leading to body image issues in a ballet school.

It seems clear that the present high school's approach, while well-intended and potentially helpful in providing information about the harms of 'excessive' body concern and disordered eating, was failing to acknowledge the reality of the ways in which appearance does matter in the lives of the girls it is addressing. In this culture, programs that suggest that concerns with appearance be set aside in order to focus on more important 'inner qualities' seem doomed to be considered as hopelessly naïve and out of touch. An alternative approach might be to frankly acknowledge the importance of appearance, and then to work on breaking the nexus between concern about appearance and necessary adherence to narrowly defined standards of beauty. Opening up a space in which critique of appearance standards is not conflated with critique of concern with appearance may allow girls to create and explore appearance-related practices that do not so heavily emphasize the pursuit of thinness and conformity to a handful of desirable 'looks'. Addressing appearance as a means of expressing oneself, and of playing with one's identity and individuality, may provide some practical strategies by which girls can negotiate the reality of their appearance mattering in a less oppressive way. Emphasizing the performativity of appearance may also weaken the sense that 'attractiveness' is a personal characteristic that one has (or lacks) to a certain, unarguable degree. Some online body acceptance activism is already engaged in this kind of project (e.g. the 'Fatshionista' community, www.fatshionista.com), and the internet provides a very promising medium in which the mainstream media can be set at least partly aside, to provide less constrained spaces for the exploration of appearance issues.

Of course, these suggestions are open to the critique that by emphasizing 'alternative' forms of beauty we are engaging in a simplistic 'girl power' kind of argument that misses the larger point that any kind of appearance concern maintains the damaging over-emphasis on girls' and women's bodies (e.g. Jeffreys, 2005). We are sensitive to this critique, and do not suggest that simply broadening the range of appearance ideals to which girls aspire is the ultimate way to prevent or undo the harms that appearance cultures may engender. However, as the mainstream western beauty ideal is so pervasive and powerful, combining as it does allusions to not only beauty and desirability, but also to health, morality, success, and self-control (Bordo, 1993), any loosening of its grip has radical potential. Getting girls to think creatively about how they want to look, rather than taking on the Sisyphean task of convincing girls that appearance is not important, may be a first step towards a school culture that understands that although appearance matters, it is both more than a simple 'score' that one achieves against a single ideal and less than an inescapable determinant of one's worth.

Finally, some limitations to this study need to be noted. First, we interviewed adolescent girls from one year level of a single high school; it is therefore possible that the matters raised by these girls may be shaped in part by the particular culture of that school. Indeed, we do expect that the all-girl aspect of the school is important to the way that the appearance culture works, and suggest that our findings are probably most applicable to other similar settings. It is also possible that the girls' awareness of our research agenda led them to talk about the appearance culture of their school in a particular way; for example, our focus on eating and body image may have led girls to talk about appearance culture more in terms of dieting and body size concerns and less in terms of make-up and fashion than they otherwise might. Girls who had existing concerns about the role of appearance and body image in school life may also have been particularly likely to volunteer for an interview. However, the consistency of the issues raised by the girls and the similarity of the practices they described allows us to have confidence that a widely recognized set of appearance-related values and behaviours created a strong appearance culture within which the girls attending the school developed a sense of their own 'attractiveness' and understood and related to their own bodies.

In summary, we found a strong sense among the girls we interviewed that appearance was a pervasive aspect of everyday life in their all-girls' school. Although some of the girls expressed the opinion that appearance, and particularly thinness, shouldn't matter as much as it does, and that not everyone was equally affected by appearance concerns, no-one expressed any optimism that their school culture would be able to shrug off the appearance ideals of fashion and celebrity culture. The appearance culture, and its attendant manifestations, was seen as being here to stay. These findings point to the value of the approach we took in this study; by asking girls directly about their views and experiences of the appearance culture in their school, we were able to see around their own personal appearance and body image concerns to glimpse the ways in which they make sense of the priorities and practices of the appearance culture that surrounds them.

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Renee Carey is a PhD Candidate in the School of Psychology at Murdoch University, Western Australia. This study forms part of her PhD dissertation, which looks at the contribution of the school environment to the body image concerns of adolescent girls.

Ngaire Donaghue is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia. Her research centres on ideological aspects of gender and identity, with a particular focus on critical feminist understandings of body dissatisfaction and beauty practices.

Pia Broderick is an Associate Professor in Psychology at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia. She is also a practicing Clinical Psychologist and her research, teaching, and practice focus particularly on the optimal development of children, adolescents, and families.