

“What You Look Like is Such a Big Factor”: Exploring  
the Role of Peer Appearance Cultures in the High School  
Environment

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Body image is a particularly troubling issue during adolescence, with many reporting significant weight and shape concerns during this time. The surrounding sociocultural environment can be seen to be integral to the experience of these concerns, and to shape the form they subsequently take. A major context in which this culture may manifest and be reproduced is the school environment, with the high school being seen as a key venue for the development and expression of body image concerns in adolescent girls. More specifically, the school environment may contribute through body perfection codes and dominant discourses embedded in the curricular structure and general school ethos, or in a more informal way through the formation of peer appearance cultures, which have been found to contribute to eating disorders and related issues in adolescent girls.

This thesis aimed to further examine the role of the school environment in contributing to body image concerns and disordered eating in adolescent girls, using a mixed-methods design. The first stage of this project, an ethnographic analysis, focused on the transmission of, and value placed upon, body image and weight concerns in a particular all-girls' school. Interviews (both group and individual) and open-ended surveys, as well as observations and textual analysis, were employed in this phase of the project, with data collected from teachers, parents, and students. Results indicated that an appearance-based culture was evident in this school environment, with students, parents and staff members all noting the importance of the school, and peers in particular, in fostering weight consciousness and influencing eating habits.

Following this, the contribution of the school and friendship groups to body image and weight concerns was quantitatively examined. Questionnaires were administered to 314 students (224 females and 90 males) from 2 coeducational schools and an all-girls' school, in a replication and extension of a previous Australian study investigating friendship clique similarities in body image concerns and eating behaviours (Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999). This

phase also aimed to explore the potential differences between single-sex and coeducational schools in terms of their students' body image and weight concerns. Overall, findings indicated that all-girls' students exhibited more body image concern than coeducational girls, with different predictive factors emerging in each school-type, indicating that the gender composition of a school is an important factor. Furthermore, this study verified that body image concern and dieting behaviour are more similar within friendship cliques than across the whole school cohort, particularly in all-girls' schools, replicating and extending the findings of Paxton and colleagues.

Overall, this study indicates that the school environment and the peer cultures embedded within play an important role in the development and maintenance of body image and weight concerns, particularly within all-girls' schools. This has implications for the prevention and treatment of such concerns, moving away from a narrow focus on individual concomitants towards more complex cultural influences. This thesis also adds significantly to the research literature, providing greater insight into how peers, and more broadly schools, may contribute to disordered eating and body image concerns.

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*A multi-method exploration of the culture of weight consciousness in an all-girls' school*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### OVERVIEW

Eating disorders are widely thought to be multidimensional in nature, arising from the interplay of numerous factors including those of a psychological, biological, developmental, familial and sociocultural nature. Clinically, eating disorders are classified into three subtypes, namely anorexia nervosa (AN), involving an unremitting quest for thinness and a morbid fear of becoming ‘fat’; bulimia nervosa (BN), whereby compensatory behaviours, such as vomiting and excessive exercise, follow periods of binge-eating; and eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS), comprising a mixture of anorexic and bulimic symptomatology focused around weight concerns and dissatisfaction with body image (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). This latter diagnosis is similar to partial syndrome or subclinical eating disorders, in which individuals engage in many of the same disordered eating behaviours as those with clinical disorders, but at a somewhat lower level of severity.

Research suggests that the prevalence of eating disorders as a whole has increased in recent years, particularly in the adolescent population, with the lifetime prevalence rate for eating disorders in adolescent girls increasing from 2.3% in 2000 (Lewinsohn, Striegel-Moore, & Seeley, 2000) to 7.66% in 2009 (Stice, Marti, Shaw, & Jaconis, 2009). Furthermore, research suggests that a much greater proportion of women and girls partake in various problematic eating behaviours at a subclinical level, with the prevalence of these likely to be highest among adolescent and student populations. Indeed, the lifetime prevalence of subthreshold disorders in adolescent girls has been estimated at 11.29% (Stice, et al., 2009), while 26% of normal-weight Canadian adolescent girls report regularly eating less to lose weight (Woodruff, Hanning, Lambraki, Storey, & McCargar, 2008). Additionally, in Australia, a recent survey of over 47,000 adolescents found body image to be cited as a significant issue of concern, ranking alongside drugs and suicide (Mission Australia, 2009).

The surrounding sociocultural environment has been found to be a major influence on the development of body image concerns and disordered eating in adolescence, with a multitude