

## A Model of Boys' Body Image in Early Adolescence

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### **Abstract**

The major aim of this study was to explore and promote a deeper understanding of the essential contributing factors to body image development in a non-clinical sample of boys, including the roles played by peers, family, and media. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 14 adolescent boys (ranging in age from 10-12 years) who were randomly selected from the participant pool of a larger quantitative study (N = 167) conducted in elementary schools in Berlin, Germany. By using thematic analyses, two major themes were identified: (1) social comparison (including two subthemes: self-improvement and self-enhancement), and (2) internalization (including two subthemes: behavioral and cognitive dimensions). On the basis of these results, a final model of how boys conceptualize body image in early adolescence was elucidated, and can be found in the study.

*Keywords:* Boys' body image, Social comparison, Internalization, Early adolescence, Semi-structured interview, Thematic analysis

*Ein Modell männlicher Körperbilder in der Adoleszenz*

### **Zusammenfassung**

Das Hauptziel dieser Studie galt der Identifizierung essentieller Faktoren der Körperbildentwicklung in einer nicht-klinischen Stichprobe von Jungen unter Berücksichtigung möglicher Einflüsse durch Peers, Familie und Medien. Es wurden semi-strukturierte Leitfadeninterviews mit 14 früh-adoleszenten Jungen (Altersrange von 10-12 Jahren) geführt, die zufällig aus den Teilnehmern einer größeren quantitativen Fragebogenstudie (N = 167) an Grundschulen in Berlin ausgewählt wurden. Mittels thematischer Analyse konnten zwei Hauptthemen identifiziert werden: (1) sozialer Vergleich (beinhaltet die beiden Subthemen Selbst-Verbesserung und Selbst-Erhöhung) und (2) Internalisierung (beinhaltet die beiden Subthemen behaviorale und kognitive Dimensionen). An Hand der Ergebnisse wurde schließlich ein finales Modell erstellt, das die Konzeptualisierung des Körperbildes von Jungen in der frühen Adoleszenz abzubilden sucht.

*Schlagworte:* Körperbild, Jungen, Sozialer Vergleich, Internalisierung, Frühe Adoleszenz, Semi-strukturierte Interviews, Thematische Analyse

## 1 Introduction and theoretical background

Although there is growing interest in body image development in adolescent boys, the literature lacks a model of male body image during early adolescence specifically. To date, the majority of studies on body image have focused on middle and late adolescents, or on children with eating disturbances. Due to the fact that body image has always been a pathology-focused field of research (cf. *Cash* 2002), most research and theories have focused on the negative clinical components of body image, such as body dissatisfaction (cf. *Keery/van den Berg/Thompson* 2004), depression (cf. *Stice et al.* 2000), and eating disorders (cf. *Ricciardelli/McCabe* 2004). In addition, because girls have been the focus of the majority of this research, there is an unfortunate lack of understanding regarding boys' body image in general at this age.

Furthermore, most literature and research about boys' body image has been guided by findings concerning females that has been, perhaps without enough consideration, applied to young males (cf. *Hargreaves/Tiggemann* 2006). This is despite the fact that research has indicated that there are essential gender differences in the course of body image development throughout adolescence. In particular, female teenagers have higher body awareness, higher dissatisfaction with their shape, lower perceived athletic competence and stronger feelings of depersonalization as compared to males (cf. *Roth* 2002). Between the ages 13 to 18 years old, girls' body image satisfaction tends to steadily decrease, while boys usually grow continuously more satisfied with their body during this time period (cf. *Rosenblum/Lewis* 1999). However, it is important to realize that such statements refer to how boys and girls perceive their bodies on *average*. Indeed, while boys are generally more satisfied with their bodies during early adolescence than girls are with theirs (e.g., *Barker/Galampos* 2003; *Rosenblum/Lewis* 1999; *Shaw/Stice/Springer* 2004), many boys experience body dissatisfaction. For example, negative body image has been found to motivate dietary changes in boys who hope to become bigger and more muscular (cf. *Cohane/Pope* 2001; *Ricciardelli/McCabe* 2007). The desire to be muscular has emerged as a central issue associated with male body image (cf. *McCreary/Sasse* 2000; *Thompson/Cafri* 2007), and has been reported as a common concern by boys during adolescence (cf. *Hargreaves/Tiggemann* 2006). Importantly, this desire for muscularity may promote potentially dangerous behaviors such as bodybuilding, taking food supplements, and anabolic steroid use (cf. *Cafri et al.* 2005; *Jones/Bain/King* 2008). In addition, the drive for muscularity is associated with emotional ramifications such as lower self-esteem, heightened depression, body image disturbances, and body dissatisfaction (cf. *Labre* 2002; *McCreary/Sasse* 2000).

The perception of body image is typically oriented towards both individual characteristics (e.g., body mass index (BMI), eating behaviors, perceived family dynamics) and socio-cultural factors (e.g., media and social pressures to be a thin female or a muscular male) (cf. *Peterson/Paulson/Williams* 2007). Research suggests that socio-cultural factors in particular are shared risk factors for boys and girls in the development of body dissatisfaction (cf. *Humphreys/Paxon* 2004). Internalized societal messages about body ideals may arise from negative feedback from peers and family members (e.g., appearance-related teasing), as well as from increased discussions with friends about body and weight issues during adolescence (cf. *Barker/Galampos* 2003; *Jones* 2004; *Jones/Vigfusdottir/Lee* 2004). Such internalized societal messages have been found to be particularly detri-

mental as they contribute to the development of body dissatisfaction, low body esteem and an interest in changing one's physical appearance (e.g., *Eisenberg/Fabes/Spinrad* 2006; *Keery/Boutelle/van den Berg/Thompson* 2005). While this research has provided valuable information for intervention and prevention programs, it is still critical to gain a more thorough overall understanding of boys' concept of body image in particular, to support boys who are at risk of developing body dissatisfaction and, in turn, strengthen their positive body satisfaction.

While quantitative studies may offer an overall idea of the typical male and female experiences during early adolescence, it is important to also gain an understanding of individual experiences through qualitative approaches that focus on the individuals' point of view, feelings, thoughts, interpretations, and perceptions (cf. *Smith/Osborn* 2003). However, qualitative studies on boys' body image are still rare. In fact, to our knowledge, there are only three qualitative studies that have focused explicitly on adolescent boys' body image, (cf. *Hargreaves/Tiggemann* 2006; *Ricciardelli/McCabe/Ridge* 2006), and only one of which has focused on the developmental phase of early adolescence specifically (10-13 years old) (cf. *Frisén/Holmqvist* 2010). While social pressures and society norms are thought to play a formative role in how early adolescent boys think and feel about their bodies (cf. *Newman/Newman* 2006), it is imperative that we assess this assumption qualitatively.

In other words, there lacks an overall model of how boys conceptualize their bodies during the developmental phase of early adolescence in particular. Such a model is imperative as it may serve to develop age- and gender-appropriate preventative programs. Such programs hope to mitigate psychosocial risks in the critical transition phase from late childhood to early adolescence, when dramatic physical changes take place including growth spurts, reproductive system development, appearance of secondary sex characteristics, increase in muscular strength and redistribution of body weight (cf. *Newman/Newman* 2006).

The aim of the present study was to conceptualize boys' body image in early adolescence in a more general way. Considering the advantages of qualitative interviews (cf. *Smith/Osborn* 2003), this method was chosen to grasp adolescent boys' point of view in depth. First, we sought to describe the essential aspects of early adolescent boys' body image. Second, we sought to explore the role of socio-cultural influences through peers, family and media. The overall goal was the derivation of a general model of boys' body image, which includes essential contributing factors and socio-cultural influences.

## 2 Method

*Participants.* The larger quantitative study's sample consisted of participants ( $N = 167$ ) who were 8- to 12-year-old 4<sup>th</sup> ( $n = 46$ ), 5<sup>th</sup> ( $n = 94$ ) and 6<sup>th</sup> ( $n = 27$ ) grade students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 10.33$  years;  $SD = .81$ ) in elementary schools<sup>1</sup> in Berlin, Germany. Approximately 53.9 % of these students were boys ( $n = 90$ ) and 46.1 % were girls ( $n = 77$ ). Fourteen adolescent boys were randomly selected from this sample to participate in semi-structured interviews about body image, male idols, social comparison and the roles played by peers, family and media. The interviews were approximately 20 to 30 minutes in length.

*Procedure.* Based on the results of the quantitative analyses (cf. Raufelder et al. 2013; Raufelder/Ittel 2013) qualitative interviews (see appendix) were conducted with 14 randomly selected boys (15% of the male sample) in spring 2011 in order to gain richer information about boys' body image and body satisfaction in late childhood and early adolescence. The interviews were conducted in a classroom in the participants' elementary schools. Invitation to participate was initiated through written letters sent to the participants' parents, which included information about the qualitative study. Within the next few days, a trained research assistant called these parents and students, enabling them to ask questions about the interview and to provide active consent. The students were reassured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and were given a small token of appreciation (10 € Amazon-coupon) for their participation. A semi-structured interview was chosen to avoid statements being too broad in scope and therefore not amenable to thematic analyses (see appendix). A male researcher conducted the interviews due to the fact that men are more likely to discuss their body image concerns with fellow men (cf. Adams/Turner/Bucks 2005; Bottamini/Ste-Marie 2006). The interviews were conducted in English, recorded with a Dictaphone and were later transcribed by trained qualitative researchers. Each interview was approximately 20-30 minutes in duration. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to ensure their anonymity.

*Semi-structured Interviews.* In accordance with Smith/Osborn (2003), an interview guideline, as shown in the appendix, was constructed. Based on the existing qualitative and quantitative research in the field, the following topics were chosen for the interview: satisfaction with one's own appearance, as well as perception of male body image in general; male idols and social comparison; the role of sports and eating behaviour; and, the influence of peers, family and media. Two interviews were conducted to pilot the interview guideline and protocol. As no concerns or problems arose during these pilot interviews, no changes were made to the guideline or protocol.

*Data Analysis.* The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (cf. Braun/Clark 2006). Our objective was to analyse expressive themes in order to identify the deeper structure of boys' body image. As described by Braun/Clark (2006), we followed the different phases of thematic analysis. In the first phase, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by transcribing the interviews and reading and rereading the transcripts. In the second phase, initial codes were generated by going through the transcripts paragraph by paragraph. These codes covered the entire data set. In the third phase, codes with similar content and that were prevalent throughout the transcripts were combined into five potential overarching themes. The fourth phase involved reviewing the chosen themes and refining them. This step led to the final nuancing of the overarching themes, where two major themes and two subthemes, respectively, were identified. Defining and naming these themes was part of the fifth phase of thematic analysis.

In the present analysis the reasoning was mainly inductive, as the data was not interpreted within a pre-existing frame. An inductive and flexible approach is particularly useful when dealing with mainly unexplored research topics, as is the case in this study.

Data analysis was conducted by hand. The analyzing process was iterative and used methods of constant comparison with repeated scrutinizing of transcripts to determine the themes emerging from the data. Analytic themes were identified to summarize the data until the researchers agreed that there were no further themes to be identified. Selected excerpts from the interviews were taken to illustrate the participants' account for each

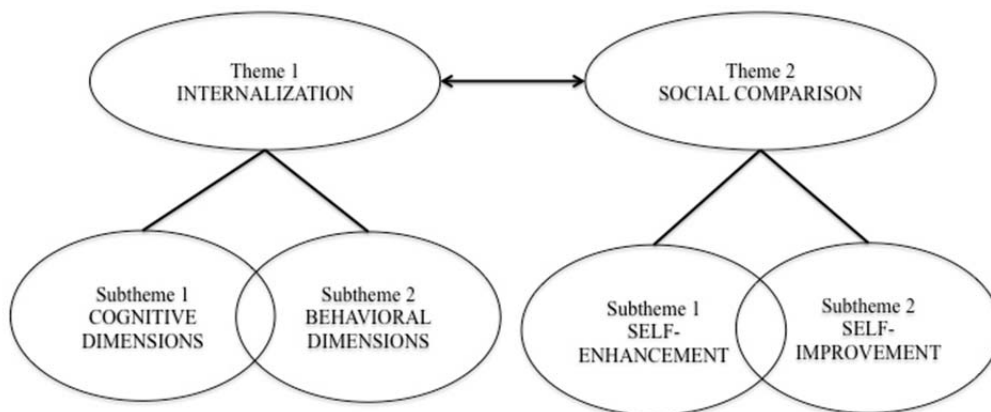
theme. Analyses presented are based on coding of the whole sample ( $N = 14$ ) with almost perfect inter-rater agreement ( $\kappa \geq .84$ ).

### 3 Results

By using thematic analysis (cf. *Braun/Clark* 2006), two major themes were identified in which societal values regarding appearance norms are transferred to the individuals' concept of body image: (1) internalization and (2) social comparison (see Figure 1). As the arrow between the two themes shows, an association between internalization and social comparison was found. Internalization is based on social comparison of the individual's self against his peers, family and representations in media. Conversely, the norms and values, on which the social comparison was made, are influenced by the internalized body ideal. Finally, the interplay of both themes influenced the constitution and development of boys' body image.

The theme of internalization consisted of two subthemes: (a) cognitive and (b) behavioral dimensions. The theme of social comparison consisted of two subthemes as well: (c) self-improvement and (d) self-enhancement (see Figure 1). The following quotations were selected to illustrate particular themes.

*Figure 1.* Results of the thematic analysis concerning early adolescent boys' body image



#### 3.1 Theme 1: Internalization

The way in which the boys expressed their thoughts about an ideal male body revealed that they had not only already internalized a cognitive male body ideal by early adolescence, but additionally, that they had internalized behavioral strategies to achieve this ideal. To find out about how male body image was internalized, we also asked the boys about their ideas and thoughts about the qualities of a handsome man.

### 3.1.1 Subtheme 1: Cognitive Dimensions

On the cognitive level, it was evident that the internalized ideal male body image was characterized by features such as muscularity and style. However, when we asked about the qualities of a handsome man, (What is a beautiful/handsome boy/man for you? Could you describe him?), some boys ( $n = 4$ ) mentioned functional characteristics such as strength and sportiness in addition to an attractive body shape. Specifically, when we asked the boys about an ideal male body, they tended to define a handsome man as an individual who is rather average, i.e., not too muscular, not too fat and not too thin:

"Like with muscles, but not too big muscles, not like the bodybuilders. Like a judo fighter. Also not like, that he is like, really big. He doesn't cut his hair like punks [do]. I don't like colour in the hair like blue." (Participant 5)

"Probably thin, but not too thin, not like skinny, but quite muscular." (Participant 11)

"But a handsome boy wouldn't be too thin or too fat...." (Participant 3)

"...And good body shape and a sense of style. Like clothing." (Participant 8)

It became clear that in imagining the qualities of a hypothetical handsome man, not only physical aspects (e.g., the right amount of muscles) were essential but also personality traits (e.g., kindness and confidence) played an important role too:

"And when he is nice and not shy it's perfect. Confident and so on. Not scared. Always nice to other people." (Participant 4)

"A gentleman, like he has to treat everybody or almost everybody with respect and not bullying anyone without a reason...." (Participant 8)

*Peers.* The interviews showed that peers did not play a key role in boys' cognitive internalization processes. None of our participants mentioned peers when we asked about their ideal male body image or where it came from. Even when we asked about male idols, no peers or friends were mentioned.

*Family.* In contrast to peers, male family members (father, older brother) often functioned as male body idols. For example:

"[In five years I want to look] like my dad. Like my dad when he was a teenager. Yes." (Participant 9)

"Mostly my brother. He also does the same sports, so I use him as a model when he throws in the [sports] tournament. Then I also....I learn from him." (Participant 5)

*Media.* In terms of cognitive internalization, only a few of the boys ( $n = 3$ ) also named soccer players or celebrities when asked about the qualities of a handsome man:

"A handsome young man would have, I would maybe compare that to somebody like James Bond." (Participant 10)

"Well, yeah I would like to be a soccer player. And which one do I like the most? Like Arjen Robben from the Dutch national team." (Participant 12)

### 3.1.2 Subtheme 2: Behavioral Dimension

On the behavioral level it became apparent that some boys had clearly identified the connection between food consumption and weight gain. Consequently, those boys monitored their eating behavior to maintain their ideal body shape:

“And I only eat like one plate or half a plate, but if I eat a lot, I worry about how this effects my growth and what happens to my belly.” (Participant 14)

“Like, I will eat more healthy food because, like, McDonald’s would get you fat... I don’t want that.” (Participant 13)

In both examples, food consumption is directly linked to body shape and emotional feelings such as worry and fear of becoming fat.

*Peers.* On the behavioral level, peers were mostly mentioned in terms of style (i.e., clothes, hair style, shoes, brands, etc.). A small number of participants ( $n = 3$ ) reported having being influenced by classmates and friends in terms of wearing specific clothes, having a certain haircut or using branded articles (i.e., iPhone, school bags, etc.):

“But I go more by the things that other people wear and also these shops like H&M and things like that.” (Participant 14)

“[...] but I just like to wear T-shirts and it’s not my own style because my friends wear...wear also things like me...” (Participant 6)

“[...] in our class, in sixth grade, there are many people with the same hair style like me [...]” (Participant 13)

All three participants expressed a peer-orientation without any explicit negative or positive evaluation. Nevertheless, the lack of statements about being unique or different than others or about having one’s own style (e.g., “it’s not my own style”), indicates, in general, a positive connotation towards having the same style as one’s peers.

*Family.* With behavioral internalization, family members in particular played a key role, such that they conveyed healthy eating behavior or sports involvement to the boys. Some boys associated their parents with healthy cooking ( $n = 3$ ), prohibition of sweets/candy or unhealthy food ( $n = 3$ ) and some boys ( $n = 4$ ) associated them with norms and rules of healthy sports involvement. For example:

“Yes I eat bio<sup>2</sup> food more. But actually my mom is concerned so...” (Participant 11)

“I don’t really care about [it] so much, but I don’t want to get like somebody who lays on the couch the whole day or like that either [...] So, my mother is very active and we also do much stuff outside and that’s why I actually don’t worry so much about it, because I know exactly that my mother would drag me to do sports...” (Participant 3)

“[...] and I do it in a fitness studio [gym] because my dad also does that, so I do other things too so it’s...yeah” (Participant 6)

“Before I would say whatever, but now my dad said that I should lose a bit of weight and then I am thinking I should not eat sweets like pudding at school and stuff.” (Participant 9)

These excerpts illustrate that boys tend to rely on their parents’ behavior and attitudes towards food, eating, and sports involvement, which in turn affects the boys’ behavior. In other words, the boys tended not to take personal responsibility for their actions in these areas. Parents’ involvement ranged from indirect effects, such as acting as a role model (e.g., “my mother is very active”) to direct affects, such as giving advice (e.g., “my dad said I should lose a bit of weight”).

*Media.* On the behavioral level of body image internalization, media was mentioned by only two boys and this concerned the subject of shopping. For example, when celebrities in the media wore accessories or clothes with a special brand, the boys tended to buy them too in order to be “cool”:

"I just [...] when I see something, like when I see people like stars and they have something cool, like glasses and I like them, then I buy it too because some other people think they are cool." (Participant 4)

"Yes...like his [Arjen Robben's] new shoes that he also wears...I sometimes also go to the store and buy them." (Participant 12)

While the latter quotation concerns naming a celebrity as a style icon, the first example emphasizes that wearing cool accessories is also linked with a positive social reputation (e.g., "because other people think they are cool").

## 3.2 Theme 2: Social Comparison

Social comparison is not only a process of collecting information about one's standing on some dimension by comparing oneself with others in the social environment (cf. *Festinger* 1954), it can also be a way by which societal standards, such as an ideal body image, are internalized. The way in which these early adolescents expressed their thoughts regarding an ideal male body showed that they used two strategies to define their individual position within the societal standards of male body ideals: self-improvement and self-enhancement. Regarding social comparisons, the boys in our study seldom reported comparing themselves to peers, family members, or people from the media with the intention to simply make a self-evaluation comparison. However, they reported drawing comparisons in order to improve themselves in specific ways (i.e., to learn skills from someone or to reach a certain ideal). Frequently, the boys employed self-enhancement comparisons, meaning they focused on certain features of peers, family members or people from media and therefore distanced themselves from possible threats to their overall self-worth.

### 3.2.1 Subtheme 1: Self-improvement

Self-improvement comparisons serve as a way to gain knowledge about desired features and hence improve oneself (cf. *Pomery/Gibbons/Stock* 2012). Many boys in our study ( $n = 6$ ) reported the desire to achieve certain characteristics of their peers, family members and sometimes people from the media. In terms of peers and family, it was striking that participants often compared themselves to people to whom they perceived themselves to be similar, and hence they believed that these ideals were attainable.

*Peers.* The boys in our study often reported comparing themselves to peers in order to meet a certain standard, especially in terms of sports:

"Yes, in Judo there is an 18-year-old boy, or almost a man. I compare myself with him because he was the same as me when he was small and we are really good friends and I mostly compare [myself] with him." (Participant 6)

This quotation underlines the principle of similarity: because the 18-year-old-boy had a similar body shape when he was younger ("he was the same as me when he was small"), this participant makes a positive comparison between himself and this individual. Furthermore, he mentioned an emotional connection ("we are really good friends"), which might be an additional aspect of the comparison process.

*Family.* As previously mentioned, family members often served as role models. This was evident in several self-improvement comparisons:



"I have a brother and he is 23 and he sometimes goes to the fitness studio [the gym] and I think he looks really good because he is not like...he is really normal. He looks good because he has a little bit more muscles than [the] average person and that's how I think he looks good: if you don't have extreme muscles, like, you look [like] you go to the fitness studio [the gym] 5 hours a day. He looks, like, a little bit more muscular than the average person. And he, when he was like I am, 12 (he is now 23) and if I think of how I will look in 5 years, I would say that I would probably look like that and I would say I would look probably like that because I think if you do what I do, I do lots of sports and then you look good, better I think than a normal person who doesn't do sports...." (Participant 10)

"Mostly my brother. He also does the same sports, so I use him as a model when he throws in the tournament [in athletic sports]. Then I also....I learn from him." (Participant 5)

In both quotations, brothers serve as positive models in terms of social comparison. Again, in both statements there is a link to sports involvement and similarity ("when he was like I am") as well as a wish to be more muscular and to look better than the average person. In addition, in the latter example a learning effect is directly specified by the participant.

*Media.* Regarding media, only a few boys ( $n = 2$ ) made self-improvement comparisons, which were not as precise as the comparisons made with peers or family:

"Sure, there are a lot of things, like, people make or have achieved, I also like to achieve but there is no one person that I definitely want to be like." (Participant 2)

### 3.2.2 Subtheme 2: Self-Enhancement

Self-enhancement is a way to improve one's self-worth (cf. *Pomery/Gibbons/Stock* 2012). In our study, several boys ( $n = 4$ ) reported making self-enhancement comparisons in order to distinguish themselves from peers, family members or people in the media.

*Peers.* One boy emphasized the importance of other traits, such as intelligence:

"No, not to be like him because, the best looking guy in our fifth grade is the one with the least brain (laughs). So, it's about his grades and all that. Good looking but no brain." (Participant 9)

To perhaps enhance his view of himself, this participant makes a negative evaluation of his good-looking classmate's intelligence.

*Family.* One boy mentioned the possibility that some bodily features were innate and hardly changeable, and therefore, he would not compare himself with his brother:

"I don't usually because I know my body is much different than his, because he is mostly almost the biggest in his class. He is more, like, with not so much fat and he has more muscles and he was born with that. So I don't really compare [myself] to him." (Participant 6)

This quotation illustrates that self-enhancement is often associated with similarity. The brother is seen as innately different ("he was born with that"), therefore the participant chooses not to compare himself to his brother. Instead of being unfavourably compared to his brother (who is, "almost the biggest... not so much fat and he has more muscles"), the boy self-enhances by differentiating himself.

*Media.* In terms of media, some boys clearly distinguished themselves from celebrities whose appearance might be biased by illustrations in the media.

"Well, actually I like football and so on. But soccer stars and so on are sometimes a little bit, uhahh, I don't know. A bit funny and also the other people: I think nobody would really fit to me [suit me as an idol] be-

cause I always see something that I don't like and so this is always the case and that is why I think that I don't have that." (Participant 3)

As in the latter quotation, this boy highlights his uniqueness and eschews comparisons with famous soccer players. Describing them as being "a bit funny" implies a negative evaluation, as does "I always see something that I don't like".

## 4 Discussion

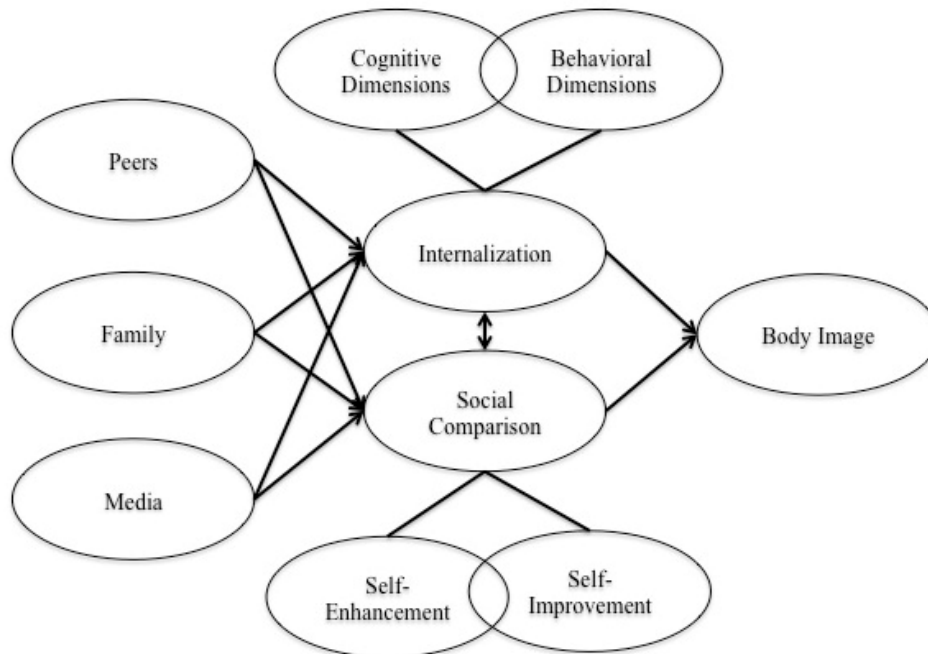
In this study, we tried to gain a deeper understanding of boys' body image in early adolescence by employing qualitative semi-structured interviews and analyzing them thematically.

Concerning body satisfaction, our results are in line with the qualitative study of *Hargreaves/Tiggemann* (2006): the boys in our study communicated a positive view of their bodies and the majority of them felt that they would not like to change their appearance in any way. However, our results illustrate that these early adolescent boys already show a strong awareness about how healthy eating behavior and exercise are associated with physical good looks. In terms of body investment, some boys have already started to restrict their eating behavior or have begun to engage in physical exercise in order to maintain a good body shape or lose weight.

In addition, most boys had a clear and similar idea of an ideal male body: not too fat and not too muscular. Concerning the qualities of a hypothetical handsome man, participants added features such as being smart or having good manners as well as possessing an attractive body shape. This reflects that young adolescent males do assign positive personality features to good-looking people, and it might also reflect an established anti-fat bias (cf. *Smolak* 2004).

Surprisingly, the two identified themes of our thematic analysis, (1) internalization and (2) social comparison, were nearly in agreement with the tripartite influence model of body dissatisfaction, which is traditionally tested in female samples to predict body dissatisfaction and the development of eating disorders (cf. *Shroff/Thompson* 2006; *Thompson/Heinberg/Altabe/Tantleff-Dunn* 1999). In addition, (a) cognitive as well as (b) behavioral dimensions could be identified as subthemes of internalization. Partly in accordance with social comparison theory (cf. *Festinger* 1954), two subthemes could be identified through thematic analyses: (c) self-improvement and (d) self-enhancement. However, self-evaluation comparisons (defined as simply reflecting the desire to compare oneself to others), which are manifestations of social comparison theory (cf. *Pomery/Gibbons/Stock* 2012), were not reported by most boys ( $n = 13$ ). Only one boy mentioned comparing his body with other peers.

Figure 2. A model of boys' body image in early adolescence



In accordance with the tripartite influence model of body satisfaction (cf. *Shroff/Thompson* 2006; *Thompson* et al. 1999), we conceptualized a model of boys' body image in early adolescence that was based on our results (see Figure 2). As we have shown, social comparisons (i.e., self-improvement and self-enhancement comparisons) as well as cognitive and behavioral internalizations were influenced by family, peers, and media to varying degrees.

Although self-improvement comparisons were more common in terms of peers and family, in terms of self-enhancement comparisons family, peers and media were equally important. Our results are in partial agreement with the study of *Krayer/Ingledeu/Iphofen* (2008), who found the use of these three types of social comparisons in a sample of 12- to 14-year-old boys and girls. However, as mentioned above, in the current study, hardly any pure self-evaluation comparisons were made, (i.e., the boys did not directly mention that they compared themselves with others). On the one hand, this might reflect a social desirability response set (i.e., if comparing one's body to others is seen as stereotypically "female", perhaps males tend to conceal their self-evaluations) (cf. *Hargreaves/Tiggemann* 2006). On the other hand, this might reflect a true gender difference, where boys are ultimately more satisfied with their bodies on average. Obviously, making many self-evaluation comparisons may lead to greater concern with one's own body, and create negative feelings of body dissatisfaction (cf. *Engeln-Maddox* 2005). However, making self-enhancement comparisons may also have a positive influence on body image and self-worth (cf. *Krayer* et al. 2008), because such comparisons allow the individual to maintain positive views about the self (cf. *Wood/Giordano-Beech/Ducharme/Michela/*

Gaus 1999). For example, negative stereotypes about others may be selectively activated and applied to make oneself feel better (cf. *Kunda/Sinclair* 1999). Self-enhancement mechanisms encompass discounting information as not relevant to the self and describing the other as inferior or at a disadvantage on a particular attribute on which one feels superior (e.g., “No, not to be like him because, the best looking guy in our fifth grade is the one with the least brain (laughs)”) (cf. *Krayer* et al. 2008). Likewise, self-improvement comparisons can produce positive effects if the individual believes that he or she can reach that ideal (cf. *Krayer* et al. 2008), which appeared to be the case in our study.

In terms of cognitive internalization, the image of an ideal male body was mostly constructed using family members and individuals in the media, rather than peers. Family members in particular, such as older brothers, appeared to be important role models for young adolescent boys.

Concerning behavioral internalization, healthy eating behavior and sports involvement were found to be communicated by parents; specifically, the mother was most often mentioned in terms of healthy eating habits, whereas the father was most often mentioned in terms of sports involvement. The influence of peers was only mentioned when it came to style.

Overall, our results suggest that in contrast to slightly older boys (cf. *Hargreaves/Tiggemann* 2006), early adolescent males are still strongly influenced by their families. This underlines the strong influence of the family as the primary socialization agent at this age (cf. *Eccles-Parsons/Adler/Kaczala* 1984; *Hill/Franklin* 1998) not only in general, but specifically in regards to boys' developing body image. It seems that the boys in our sample sought out idols/role models in their immediate environment, whose looks are perceived as attainable, rather than comparing themselves to actors or athletes who may represent an unrealistic ideal. Peers are influential in terms of behavioral internalization (i.e., style, clothes, hair cut, etc.) and social comparison in terms of body image (self-improvement and self-enhancement), and presumably this influence will increase through adolescence, when the peer group replaces the family as a secondary socialization agent (cf. *Crockett/Losoff/Petersen* 1984; *Lattimore/Butterworth* 1999).

The secondary role played by media in our results are in line with *Vincent/McCabe* (2000), who discovered that media plays a less important role in transmitting socio-cultural messages regarding body ideals to boys than it does to girls, as well as with *Ricciardelli/McCabe* (2003), who posited that boys do not perceive media as addressing them directly in terms of body image.

Finally, based on the results of the thematic analysis, a model of boys' body image was conceptualized, which integrated the essential aspects as well as the socio-cultural influences (see Figure 2). Such a model is imperative as it may serve to develop age- and gender-appropriate preventative programs. Such preventive programs, which could and should be established in schools, are able to reduce psychosocial risks in the critical transition phase from late childhood to early adolescence, when dramatic physical changes take place, which often affect psychological well-being in a negative way.

## 5 Strength, Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, the findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of a number of limitations. First, as is common to qualitative research methods, the small sample size and the specificity of the sample (from upper-class international schools) in this study limits the generalizability of the findings; therefore, our results need to be interpreted with caution. By continuing to collect data until no further themes emerged and refining themes through constant comparison, we aimed to achieve theoretical saturation of the topic of interest (cf. *Taylor/Bogdan* 1984; *Morse* 1995). However, due to the limitations of the sample, other important themes may have been omitted. A replication of these findings with larger, more representative samples from diverse populations in a quantitative study would be imperative. A second limitation is that most boys are non-English native speakers and therefore they might have expressed their thoughts about the topics in a limited way. Nevertheless, they all attended an international school where they were accustomed to speaking English every day. Thirdly, it should be noted that we did not conduct any follow-up interviews in which the themes that had been identified were presented to the participants. Such a step could have been helpful to confirm or supplement the extracted themes with the participants. Fourthly, as parents were informed about the interviews and had to declare their consent to conduct the interviews, they might have influenced their children by talking about the topic or by instructing their children to give the “right” (socially desired) responses. Finally, a social desirability response set might have accounted for the fact that most boys did not mention body dissatisfaction initially. But when we directly asked if they would like to change something about their body, most boys admitted that they wanted to be bigger, more muscular or thinner. Additionally, the questionnaires showed that one third of the boys in the larger sample were not satisfied with their body. Hence, it is not clear whether boys at that age are really satisfied with their body or if it is socially desirable for them to declare that they are satisfied. This might reflect another gender difference.

Despite these limitations, the present study has extended the existing research on boys’ body image in early adolescence in a non-clinical sample. Qualitative methodology was used in this study as we aimed to explore and promote a greater depth of understanding of the topic than might have been achieved in a quantitative design. Our findings provide important evidence that boys’ body image in early adolescence is largely influenced by family and peers, rather than by media. In particular, same-sex role models (i.e., father, brothers, male friends) are essential for both social comparison and for internalization in the constitution of body image.

Future research needs to focus on gender variances concerning the different types of social comparison. In addition, it would be imperative to link boys’ body image with “doing muscularity” theory (cf. *Coleman* 1990; *Budde* 2009), where children are thought to learn through socialization that specific patterns represent masculinity. Furthermore, prospective studies are needed to examine whether and how the employment of social comparisons, and hence the concept of body image, changes over time. Likewise, the changing influence of family, media and peers could be monitored during childhood and adolescence. More understanding of when and how body image issues emerge in children will help to develop preventative programs to promote a healthy body image and lead to greater body satisfaction in early adolescents.

## Author Note

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## Footnotes

- 1 The teaching language in both schools is English. Therefore the questionnaires and interviews were conducted in English.
- 2 "bio food" means organic food.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol Including the Main Questions

- How would you describe your body?
- And what are your feelings about it?
- If you could be different, how would you be?
- Do you compare your body sometimes with others (peers/idols/family members)?
- What is a beautiful/handsome boy/man for you? Could you describe?
- Do you have any person/idol that you refer to for your look and image (from sport, TV, music, movies...)? Why do you like this person/idol? Is there any 'advice or tip' you take from them to change yourself? If yes, what is it?
- How do you want to look in five years?
- Do you sometimes eat because you feel bored?
- What are the main feelings and thoughts you have while/after eating?
- What is your favorite meal and why?
- How do you feel while/after doing sports?