Refusing the stereotype
Decoding negative gender imagery through a school-based digital media literacy program

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The media play a significant role in shaping cultural norms and attitudes, concomitantly reinforcing “body” and “beauty” ideals and gender stereotypes. Unrealistic, photoshopped and stereotyped images used by the media, advertising and fashion industries influence young people’s body images and impact on their feelings of body satisfaction, self-esteem and confidence. Drawing on an evaluation of a youth-centred, school-based digital media literacy program involving Year 8 students and teachers from three Melbourne secondary schools, this paper argues that building media literacy skills in young people is crucial, as they construct a sense of self within a social milieu that is characterised by pervasive and unrealistic media images delivered in a multiplicity of forms. The evaluation reveals how an interactive online curriculum resource contributes to media literacy outcomes for young people by encouraging them to critically analyse and deconstruct media images. They can thus cultivate more realistic appraisals of their own bodies, enhancing their resilience against the undermining influence of the media. The evaluation findings also highlight the benefits of young people’s participation and leadership in a learning environment.

Body image issues are a major concern for young people in most developed countries. Mission Australia’s Youth Survey 2012 found that, despite several government initiatives introduced to address the problem, body image was one of the top three issues of personal
concern for young people (Mission Australia 2012). The survey revealed that worries about body image were considerably higher among girls, with 43% of girls being “extremely” or “very” concerned about body image compared with 18.6% of boys (Mission Australia 2012). The same survey previously revealed that 75% of girls aged 14 to 16 years wanted to weigh less and have a thinner body; this figure includes those who were identified as being underweight (Mission Australia 2010).

The relationship between the transmission of body ideals in the media, the internalisation of these ideals by young people and their levels of body dissatisfaction is the topic of recent research. Pasha and Golshekhoh (2009) found that internalisation of body ideals was the greatest predictor of body dissatisfaction among girls. This finding is echoed in Youth Central’s research on positive body image, which revealed that 62.8% of young people felt that media and advertising impacted upon their self-perceptions, and 68% of respondents agreed that education on body image and the media would help (Youth Central 2010). Among the suggestions offered for encouraging positive body image in young people were: using models that are more realistic and representative of community diversity; banning the use of digital manipulation, or creating campaigns to raise awareness of such practices; and doing more to promote positive body image among young men (Youth Central 2010).

Media literacy

Australian children are becoming increasingly disturbed by the relentless marketing strategies of companies attempting to sell them nonessential products (Tucci, Mitchell & Goddard 2007). Aggressive marketing towards this demographic coupled with the significant impact of the media on young people’s sense of self and body image highlights the importance of media literacy skills. Media literacy is a multidimensional concept involving the development of higher-order thinking skills such as media messaging, writing and critical-thinking skills. Hobbs and Frost (2003) offer a typology of media literacy skills which includes identification of the purpose, target audience, construction techniques, values and point of view, and omitted information of media forms.

Park (2012), however, challenges this reductionist construct of media literacy which limits it to an ability to analyse and evaluate media content, as this does not account for the social and historical context of media production and consumption. He argues that literacy is not “a context-free or neutral skill, but rather the mastery over the processes that culture and society have made significant” (2012, p.89). Effective media literacy therefore not only involves the skills to interpret social artefacts, but also consideration of the overall social context in which they are located.

Despite Australian leadership (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2009), efforts to measure media literacy are still in their infancy. Yet the studies that do exist suggest that programs designed to enhance young people’s media literacy skills are effective. Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2000) conducted an evaluation of an American media literacy program, ‘Free to be Me’, which focused on the dieting behaviours, attitudes towards body image and media knowledge of young girls. The research found that media literacy training strengthened young girls’ resistance to unrealistic body and gender portrayals in the media (particularly advertising) and improved their body self-acceptance. It also promoted changes in the girls’ media consumption, leading to a reduction in their internalisations of the portrayed sociocultural ideals. The authors concluded that brief interventions such as ‘Free to be Me’ may successfully promote deeper
thinking about media messages, but that the brevity of such programs (six sessions) makes expectations of substantial and/or longer-term changes in body image attitudes unrealistic (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2000, p.1472).

Findings from more recent Australian research support the positive outcomes of (school-based) interventions that promote young people’s media literacy and enhanced self-esteem. These interactions are considered critical in ameliorating the impacts of negative media imagery around body image (Education Services Australia 2011; McLean, Paxton & Wertheim 2013; Yager et al. 2013). Concomitantly, it is recommended that efforts to encourage the media, fashion and advertising industries to promote positive body messages continue.

**Student-centred learning**

A significant body of research has illustrated the power of student-centred, experiential approaches to engage young people in learning (Black, Stokes & Turnbull 2010). At its most effective, student-centred learning involves young people in the planning, development and delivery of learning. It also uses collaborative peer-to-peer learning or teaching approaches that promote young people’s intellectual, social and personal development. Research shows that this environment encourages learners’ responsibility for their educational experiences (Rubin & Hebert 1998). Marcos (2008) reports on how a peer-teaching model can increase student engagement in and enthusiasm for mathematics. Using a web-based resource (Mathtrain.com), the researchers evaluated the application of a peer-teaching model through a series of podcasts and online forums where resources were shared and homework problems discussed between students, teacher and parents. The platform was designed to encourage middle-years students to collaboratively solve problems and share the learning. The study revealed that the online collaboration led to greater levels of empowerment for students as they took a more active approach to learning. Other research has shown that peer teaching encourages greater empathy for the learning styles and needs of others and increases the individual’s awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses (Osen 1999).

**The SeeMe project and young people’s leadership**

On the basis of the premise that increasing young people’s critical media literacy skills can reduce harmful media internalisation, and in response to persistent reports by Australian young people that body image remains a top issue of personal concern, in 2010 the Queen Victoria Women’s Centre (QVWC) developed the SeeMe Media Literacy Project. The project aimed to work with young people to collaboratively develop a digital media literacy curriculum resource that raised their critical awareness of the media’s unrealistic portrayals of body image and gender stereotypes and improved their sense of body satisfaction.

As part of the project, the QVWC commissioned Education Services Australia to conduct the SeeMe Research and Scoping Study to inform the context, practice, age and gender cohort and curriculum alignment for the SeeMe Project (Education Services Australia 2011). The study identified a gap in the availability of digital curriculum resources supporting the development of male and female students’ media literacy and positive body image. An English curriculum alignment was seen as ideal for the development of an online media literacy resource. The study also recommended that Years 7 and 8 provided the strongest opportunities for curriculum integration. In light of the potentially sensitive and challenging issues, Year 8 students were considered to be the best participant group for the SeeMe Project.
Young people’s engagement as leaders and learners was central to the SeeMe Project. Key among the project’s aims was to provide a youth-centred, highly participatory project that would be implemented by the young people themselves through a peer-to-peer pedagogical approach. The QVWC established the SeeMe Pilot Group made up of 10 Year 8 Student Leaders (seven female and three male) and Teacher Champions from three Victorian schools to develop the SeeMe digital resource. The development of the resource involved the SeeMe Pilot Group participating in five workshops to co-design the resource. The group worked with Education Services Australia to develop and test the information and communications technology (ICT) architecture, creative brief, and website name. They also worked with the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English to develop the SeeMe web content and interactive activities, and the Foundation for Young Australians to develop and test evaluation surveys. The final workshop focused on the Student Leaders’ peer-facilitation skills and on preparing them to run the SeeMe pilots in their classrooms. This iterative development of the resource provided real-life learning, collaboration, decision-making and leadership opportunities for the students.

Implemented using a peer facilitation approach, the pilot classroom application of SeeMe took place in four Year 8 English classrooms from October to December 2011. There were six modules on topics that included gender stereotypes, body image, fashion and cosmetics, plus ‘Photoshock’ during which students watched a digital enhancement in progress. The Student Leaders implemented the modules with Teacher Champions providing strategies to support classroom delivery.

### Evaluating SeeMe

In 2011, a senior researcher from the Foundation for Young Australians was commissioned by the QVWC to independently evaluate the SeeMe Project. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the extent to which SeeMe enhanced young people’s media literacy skills in relation to body image, gender awareness and gender and cultural stereotypes in the media. It was anticipated that the evaluation would highlight SeeMe’s contribution to the evidence base of media literacy initiatives as well as identify measures that can be usefully applied to monitor the project’s future implementation, outcomes and longer-term impact.

#### Method

The principal data collection instruments for the evaluation were pre- and post-pilot online surveys and the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique. The survey explored attitudinal, behavioural and knowledge change in relation to body satisfaction, gender awareness and media literacy. MSC provided further reflection on the experience, by tracing emerging meanings and impacts of engagement with the SeeMe classroom pilots.

The presence of media literacy skills was measured by participants assessing themselves on a four-point Likert scale by indicating the extent to which they could identify critical elements of media messages (Arke & Primack 2009; Hobbs & Frost 2003). This section also measured behavioural change as a result of increased media literacy, specifically whether participants made more informed media consumption choices after participating in SeeMe.

Both methods also focused on broader social outcomes, such as possible shifts in participants’ awareness of future opportunities and choices resulting from a more developed
sense of self. Evidence of this would point to a deeper understanding of the process by which social reality is constructed and, it was anticipated, could have implications for young people’s sense of self and body satisfaction.

The surveys and MSC sessions were carried out with one class from each of the three participating schools (two government and one independent) that had completed the five pilot modules. There were 66 responses to the pre-survey, 47 to the post-survey and 48 students participating in the MSC session. The Student Leaders were not surveyed as their involvement in the design and peer facilitation of the pilot would distort findings. They were, however, included in the MSC sessions.

The 29% dropout rate from the pre to post surveys was primarily an issue of timing. The pilots were conducted late in the 2011 school year and, due to competing end-of-school-year demands, it was difficult to monitor and track student completion of the surveys. Two of the classes completed the post surveys in early 2012.

The majority of the participants in the sample were female, 14 years old, Australian born and English speaking.

**Most significant change**

MSC is a qualitative, narrative-based tool developed to capture and describe the experience of participants in programs designed to bring about change (Dart & Davies 2003). Originally designed for use in international development contexts, MSC has been successfully applied to a wide range of settings, capturing subjective experience while also explaining some of the transformative processes behind more measurable program effects (Kelaher et al., 2008). While the surveys captured largely quantitative data, MSC provided a broader, more contextual understanding of the impact of SeeMe. MSC provides important information about how the experience of SeeMe becomes integrated with students’ life experiences and developments during and after the pilot. It also allows for further reflection on the experience itself.

MSC data were collected from the 48 students approximately two weeks after the pilot’s completion. A separate MSC session was conducted with the Student Leaders. As MSC principally relies on storytelling, it was implemented in a focus-group setting. MSC was implemented in the following stages:

1. Stories were collected from participants describing what had changed for them as a result of participating in the SeeMe pilot. These stories were intended to identify a single event reflecting practical change (for good or bad) related to SeeMe.

2. Smaller groups of three to four individuals were formed, where the students discussed their stories and selected one that represented the common experiences they shared. A scribe recorded key points from the discussion regarding the selection. These notes form a key part of the dataset, especially the reasons why the group chose a particular story and the meanings or values that surfaced through this discussion.

3. The final set of stories, along with the reasons for selection, were then analysed.

Prior to analysis, the stories were fed back to participants in order to ensure transparency. Analysis involved an equal focus on the stories and the accompanying notes that outline the reasons for selection.

A total of 17 selected stories were collected in the MSC sessions. This material was accompanied by a considerable amount of data regarding the reasons behind story selection. These data provided important information about the experience, illuminating the values
and meanings that participants bring to the experience and how they process and apply the experience to their everyday lives.

The MSC data were analysed openly to provide nuanced insights to complement the quantitative findings from the surveys:

... MSC is critical for connecting observed causes with effects, particularly by providing testimony from participants as to how inputs were experienced to produce outputs, how events are interpreted and what meanings attach to activities. It is a form of data that can be deployed in the justifications or explanations later offered by researchers, data that is not available either from normal quantitative or qualitative sources. (Kelaher et al. 2008, p.156)

Ethics approval was sought from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. In the case of the independent school, approval was sought from the principal. As participants were below 18 years of age, informed consent was required from parents as well as students.

Limitations of the study

In addition to the small size of the sample, there was no comparator group incorporated into this evaluation. The study used a cross-sectional snapshot rather than a longitudinal approach. Generally speaking, this would be expected to make positive impacts more difficult to detect. However, positive effects were observed throughout the data. Further research would be required to assess the generalisability of current findings to other schools adopting SeeMe in the future. A larger-scale, longitudinal study involving an experimental design should be implemented in future research pursuits, particularly those involving culturally diverse contexts.

Findings: tools for decoding texts

Several key themes emerged from this study relating to young people’s perceptions and understandings of advertising, particularly the messaging promoted and the often surreptitious methods in which it is delivered. The results show that students improved their capacity to identify key attributes of media messaging after SeeMe. The strongest literacy observed was that of identifying construction techniques media use to attract and hold an audience’s attention. Females appeared more attuned to these techniques, suggesting a “hyper awareness”. This is unsurprising as they are the key targets of media messages and are more likely to be exposed to and affected by manipulation techniques. The MSC stories provided by students had a stronger

It must also be noted that MSC, while a highly responsive and collaborative tool, should not be used as a stand-alone method. The group nature of this approach can affect what participants discuss, and the storytelling aspect lends itself to probable selection biases (Kelaher et al. 2008, p.164). For this reason, the SeeMe evaluation combined it with data collected from surveys to provide a holistic evaluation picture that captured impacts and diversity of experience.

While the survey findings provide valuable insights into the impact of the SeeMe Project, space limitations do not permit a discussion here of the quantitative findings. However, these can be found in the full SeeMe evaluation report (Foundation for Young Australians 2012).

This paper reports on the findings from the MSC sessions as they present a deeper understanding of the processes by which social reality is constructed and the potential implications for young people’s perceptions of themselves and their world with regard to media literacy, gender awareness and body image.

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focus on media or advertisement techniques and their influence. As one student put it:

The SeeMe Project has resulted in me thinking every time I am affected by advertising, “Am I being brainwashed?” The answer is almost always yes. (MSC selected story, 2011)

The development of a greater awareness of media devices and how they function to shape viewer opinion is also captured in the following selected stories:

SeeMe has taught me new perceptions of the advertisement industry. Not to believe everything I see and also the different advertising techniques that are used ... I think that has made me more aware of advertising. (MSC selected story, 2011)

During this project, I have learnt new things. I look at advertising differently, I try and work out who the targeted audience is. (MSC selected story, 2011)

A second key theme to emerge from the evaluation relates to culture and notions of self and self-image, particularly as it is refracted through media imagery. When it came to assessments of the stereotypes engendered in the media, students felt that representations of women’s bodies were mostly neither accurate nor representative of people they knew and that there were strong cultural biases embedded in media and advertising:

Most of the women or nearly all are american, australians etc. you don’t see people from africa much or even south america much. my point is that there are not much cultural women in media. (MSC story, 2011)

It is not viewed as attractive to not be “anglo” and the covergirl image of beautiful. (MSC story, 2011)

It was acknowledged that cultural representations of men are more diverse than those of women.

Along with recognition of a cultural bias, students reported an accompanying feeling of marginalisation, particularly for female Muslim students who acknowledged the conspicuousness of their ethnicity.

Because i am scarfed and not much muslims are shown on tv unless they’ve committed a crime. (MSC story, 2011)

The following story accurately captures what Hall (1997) describes as a “regime of representation” whereby a repertoire of imagery and visual effects are invoked in the construction of representations of difference:

... the media potrays muslims as terrorists and though to be making “weapons of masdistruction” ... its heartbreaking to know we have haters for nothing. (MSC story, 2011)

Thompson et al. (2004) define idealisation as a process by which an individual buys into a set of social norms around looks and beauty leading to an incorporation of these standards and values to the point of modifying his or her behaviour. With this in mind, the evaluation was interested in whether a greater awareness of the media dominance in shaping people’s attitudes would impact on young people’s behaviours, particularly shifts in participants’ awareness of future opportunities and choices resulting from a more developed sense of self. Evidence of this, along with attitudinal, behavioural and knowledge changes, would point to a deeper understanding of the process by which social reality is constructed.

Students were also asked if they believed they made more informed choices about media – such as which programs to watch, which magazines to avoid – as a result of SeeMe.
Females showed a greater propensity for making more informed media choices after SeeMe. This could be explained by the fact that females are more commonly targeted by media manipulation strategies than males. Thus, it could be expected that any positive behavioural effects will be greater within this group. This is particularly salient given that the *Mission Australia Youth Survey 2012* showed that females tended to use the internet and magazines as sources of information and advice. Indeed, females ranked magazines “equally as important as parent/s (60.3%) as sources of information they felt comfortable going to” (Mission Australia 2012, p.18). This highlights the importance of enhancing media literacy skills in young people to enable them to critically evaluate the sources of information they are increasingly turning to for information and advice.

The findings also emphasised that participants now view media with a fresh set of eyes, resulting in closer interrogation of techniques used in advertising. A common theme to emerge in the MSC stories revolved around a proclivity towards deconstructing media and advertising texts in ways that were not available to them previously. Generally, female participants showed a greater bias towards this behavioural change. Making more informed choices about the media as a result of SeeMe is an important outcome of the project as, traditionally, behavioural shifts take longer to be realised.

**SeeMe student leaders**

Given youth participation was a central element to the project, the evaluation was also interested in capturing the experience of the members of the SeeMee Pilot Group. The Student Leaders exhibited a strong sense of ownership and pride over the development process and final product and reported significant improvement in their critical-thinking skills and a heightened awareness of the devices used in advertising and the media. While it was intended that the impact of being involved in the design and implementation of SeeMe would be measured, it seems that the SeeMe resource itself proved to have greater impact. The majority of Student Leaders’ MSC stories focused on shifts in the way individuals see the media and advertising world. For instance, one participant stated:

> Over the weeks I have learnt about how much the media changes people and ideas and how people accept these things. I always knew that these perfect pictures had been digitally changed but I never knew about the lengths they go to get you to buy/use their products. (MSC selected story, student leader session, 2011)

This notion that young people are already cognisant of image manipulation techniques used by the media is salient. The value of the SeeMe Project is not so much that it works on a “naïve” audience but rather that it formalises, through the enhancement of critical media literacy skills, practices around interrogating and critically interpreting media texts.

The findings highlight that while students may have already had a sense of being manipulated by the media, it was not until they interrogated it through a structured process that their perceptions really changed. Alongside increased awareness of the processes by which the media can mediate an individual’s sense of self (body image), this study made an important contribution to the existing evidence base in support of the benefits of peer-led programs and interventions across a variety of settings (Hildebrand et al. 2012; Parkin & McKeganey 2000).
Conclusion

The qualitative and quantitative insights derived from this evaluation highlight the broader social benefits that can result from enhanced critical thinking skills when applied to the media. The evaluation found that young people expressed increased confidence in being able to critically analyse media texts, deconstruct advertising and understand the wider impact of the media on others. This was a highly valued outcome for the students. It suggests a possible link between enhanced higher-order critical thinking skills and greater levels of confidence among young people. This confidence, which in some cases manifested in changes in the way participants handled social situations, is an unanticipated yet valuable outcome.

The evaluation found that the classroom pilots increased student media literacy skills and behavioural change around media consumption, with many students demonstrating a greater degree of discretion in their media choices. This direct result provides strong evidence for the link between knowledge and positive behavioural change that can lead to longer-term impacts for young people. There was also a strong timbre around the extent of stereotyping, racism and discriminatory advertising in the media.

A major component of the SeeMe Project was the involvement of Student Leaders as peer facilitators of the classroom pilots. This critical peer-to-peer element of the project provided a collegial and supportive learning environment for students while enabling teachers to step back and learn from this alternative pedagogical process. SeeMe encourages youth engagement with ICT in ways not often available to them and, as such, provides a valuable example of successful peer-directed, authentic learning.

A synthesis of the elements of this evaluation, such as media literacy measures and measures gauging awareness of gender in the media, shows that this school-based, interactive, online resource makes a considerable contribution to media literacy outcomes for young people. The evaluation illustrates that young people are aware of the widespread perpetuation of gender and cultural stereotypes in the media and the damaging implications of this. Building young people’s media literacy is crucial as they construct a sense of self within a social milieu characterised by pervasive and unrealistic images delivered in a multiplicity of forms. This evaluation has demonstrated the effectiveness of SeeMe in encouraging young people to critically analyse and deconstruct media images, thus cultivating more realistic appraisals of their own bodies and resilience in the face of the undermining influence of the media. It has also shown that young people can lead and work with partners to shape their own learning, health and wellbeing.

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